

Daddy,
I Don't Want
to Marry!

VOLUME TWO

HONG HEESU



Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry

II

Hong Heesu

Copyright

Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry 2

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Translation by J.Y Lim Edited by R.A. Piper

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DADDY, I DON'T WANT TO MARRY

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First published in Korea in 2019 by Shinyoung Media Service, INC.

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First Edition: November 2021

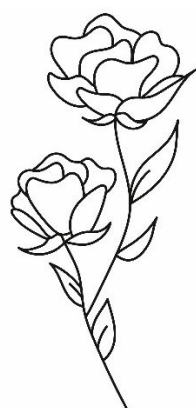
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ISBN 978-1-954707-01-6 (digital)

“I don’t even know how I can improve from here,” she confessed. “No matter how hard I try, I’ll never be accepted.”



Protect You

“I’m sorry? D-did I... by any chance... offend you, my lady?” Baron Gordon stuttered, taken aback. Rather than sympathy, however, I felt anger churning my insides. He treated the powerless brutally but had the audacity to act pitifully in front of me.

He reminded me of my superiors in my past life. They frequently abused their authority, acting servile toward those who stood above them while raising their voices against the weak. Although I wanted to berate him to my heart’s content, I was aware that we were in the middle of a busy street where many nobles frequented. If I blindly supported Father’s disciple, a commoner, I was bound to excite more rumors about me. I had no way around this situation without first putting on a little act.

I pointed at Father’s disciple and straightened my spine, donning an austere gaze. “Well, weren’t you mistreating *my man* just now?” I declared.

Immediately, Father’s disciple looked aghast. He was taken aback, which I thought understandable. “*I’m trying to save you, so keep your mouth shut. Okay?*” I tried to hint, leveling him with an intense gaze.

Although I had spoken to the baron, I unexpectedly received a reply from elsewhere: the knights.

“What? What do you mean by that, my lady?”

“What did you mean by *my man*?”

Their unusually gloomy voices startled me. *Yikes*. I forgot about them because it was a habit of mine to ignore my escort knights since they made me feel uncomfortable whenever I went shopping.

I turned around. “He’s a secret escort Father privately assigned to me,” I explained calmly. “He’s a very skilled mercenary.”

“I was never informed of this, my lady,” Geraldine said, looking stubborn. He

seriously lacked the ability to adapt to these kinds of situations.

I sighed. I decided to explain the circumstances of this situation to them later. This moment called for a few white lies. “I asked Father to keep it a secret from my knights because I assumed it would displease you all.”

“But—”

“I’m talking to someone right now, so I’ll give you all the details about this later.

Geraldine bowed with a sigh. “Yes, my lady,” he said, stepping back.

I resumed glaring at Baron Gordon. “Now, do you really think I’m just going to let you go after messing with my guard, Baron Gordon?”

The baron winced in response. “What do you mean *messing* with him?! That man tripped me then spoke to me informally!” he protested. It was like his life was on the line or something. “How are you going to compensate for the damage done to me?”

Within aristocratic society, a noble only held their subordinate accountable for a mistake if the conflict it inspired got out of hand. Therefore, it was more common for both parties to let the issue slide so as to not offend each other. Now that he knew it would be hopeless to attempt to forge any friendly relations with me, he switched gears, trying to squeeze some money out of me instead. As a self-made noble with common origins, he was just as servile as expected, but he wasn’t the slightest bit agreeable, judging by how fast his attitude had changed.

Sighing, I realized how much I really didn’t like this person. Even at first glance I could tell that the baron had been the one to initiate the argument, unjustly demanding an apology he had no right to receive. In any case, it would’ve been impossible for Father’s disciple to degrade himself in front of someone who picked a fight with him. Even if he had truly been in the wrong, I doubted he would ever apologize with that fierce personality of his.

It couldn’t be helped. In a situation like this...

“This escort of mine grew up in the countryside, so he isn’t accustomed to the social norms prevalent here. Nevertheless, it’s my fault that I didn’t teach him

any manners, so I will take full responsibility as his lady,” I said softly. I leveled the baron with a flagrant death stare, and he met my gaze with a bright expression.

He was probably getting excited at the thought of how much I might compensate him, wasn't he? But, as the saying goes: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. In this type of situation, masters either punished their subordinates or compensated the other party involved, but since I planned not to waste my time or money by doing either, I came up with another method to resolve this ordeal. It would prove both peaceful and frugal.

“Why don't we call it even with this, Lord Gordon?” I began. “Speak as informally to me as my guard did to you.”

The baron's smile immediately disappeared from his face.



Speak informally? To her?

After digesting Lady Floyen's suggestion, the baron shivered, coming to a realization. He had made a faulty judgment. The nobles he had acquainted himself with had babbled about the lady's lack of manners and her dreadful, arrogant personality, so he had been certain about this course of action. However...

“Go ahead. Say something,” she said haughtily, her gaze as clear as it was intimidating and fierce. No matter how he looked at her, she wasn't the immature child he assumed her to be, but rather a fiend that would threaten his life the moment he lowered his guard.

This vile wench... She only had the nerve to make such a claim because she knew he wouldn't be able to do it. The baron had attained his noble title through staying shrewd, so he knew that if he sought to assuage his pride and forgo formality when addressing her, he would be punished for mutiny. It was a crime serious enough to strip him of his hard-earned yet insignificant status.

Hurriedly, he bowed. "I have caused my lady great inconvenience. Please be generous and forgive me."

Even though he apologized, she shook her head with disapproval. "I don't think you should seek forgiveness from me, but from my guard," she said coldly.

The baron gritted his teeth, livid at the prospect of bowing to a commoner. Even so, he immediately lowered his head, knowing that he would enrage Lady Floyen if he didn't. "I'm sorry about what happened. It seems that I've misunderstood you," he forced out. Sensing his insincerity, Max simply looked down upon him in lieu of responding.

How dare a commoner behave with such arrogance merely because he was backed by a lady of prominence! The baron stared back at Max, furious, but then he reeled back when he saw the commoner's red eyes cloud with bloodlust. He didn't realize it until now. How were that man's eyes so...

He suddenly came to his senses.

He had done everything to climb the social hierarchy, from becoming a hitman bound by contract to threatening and harming others. Despite all his dirty deeds, he had never seen such menacing eyes.

That thing was dangerous.

The commoner now frightened the baron more than the lady did. Nervous, he gulped, the urge to leave as soon as possible rising rapidly within him.

"Now that I have apologized, I'll be leaving," he hurriedly said. Then, he disappeared, fleeing the scene.

Max watched the man go, and as he scrutinized him, a devious smirk slowly slithered upon his lips. He took note of the lowly noble. *Baron Gordon, huh...*

He should kill that fool soon.

At that moment, however, a voice tickled his ears. "Are you okay?" Lady Floyen asked. "Did you get hurt anywhere?"

When the person he had been searching for came into view, his bloodthirsty gaze dissolved into something much more docile. Did she think an idiot like that baron could hurt him? Max was about to respond as he usually did, but then he

stopped, remembering what she had told him once before.

“I’m still in a situation where I’m being ignored by those in high society,” she had said. *“How much of a joke will they think I am if you disrespected me as well?”*

He took her small, slender, and warm hands, grasping them tightly. “I’m fine, my lady,” he replied.

Jubelian’s eyes quivered.



I couldn’t believe he would run away like that. It was odd to witness the baron leave so quietly after causing a commotion and insisting on an apology like that, but it wasn’t so strange when I really thought about it.

I didn’t intend to make him uncomfortable by telling him to address me informally, but he probably couldn’t help but feel that way due to my lofty status. Well, either way, there was no telling what he would’ve done to Father’s disciple if I hadn’t intervened and unintentionally demeaned him. No matter how skilled Father’s disciple was at swordsmanship, he wouldn’t be able to avoid getting punished for opposing a nobleman.

I cast a furtive glance at Father’s disciple, but it didn’t look like he was injured anywhere. *Hmm*, since he seemed so stiff, was he shocked by what had happened?

Out of concern, I extended my hand toward him. “Are you okay? Did you get hurt anywhere?” I asked. He turned toward me. He probably wasn’t frightened because his eyes didn’t look any different from how they usually were. That was a relief.

Was it because I had confided in him a few times already? We weren’t close enough to be considered friends, but I felt comfortable around him anyway. I was glad. After what had happened, I got worried he would be intimidated and keep his distance from me...

At that moment, he suddenly took my hands in his.

Um... Why was he holding them so tightly? His firm grasp reminded me of a lost child who had finally found his parents. It amused me that I could glean such innocence from him despite his imposing size.

I guess he was relieved to encounter someone he knew. Letting him stay in my room and feeding him hadn't been in vain, it seemed. He was finally opening up to me.

Then, he addressed me in a manner I never thought I'd ever hear from him. "I'm fine, my lady," he said.

His sudden formality made me skeptical. I didn't doubt my ears since they were working perfectly fine, so I paused wonderingly. What had gotten into him? I couldn't understand why someone who frequently invited trouble with his stubborn impropriety now treated me in a wholly uncharacteristic manner.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked again. His dispute with the baron had gone on for some time before I had intervened, so it was possible someone had hit him on the head or something. Bearing that suspicion in mind, I inspected his face attentively, but I couldn't see much because of his tall stature.

At least he had his height going for him. Not only did he tower over me, but he was also handsome. Even though the commotion had passed, a lot of people continued to stop and gawk at him.

"Who is that gentleman over there?" one person asked.

Hm. I'm not sure, but isn't that Lady Floyen next to him?"

"Oh my, it is. And they're holding hands, I see!"

No matter how big the plaza was, it still sat at the very center of the capital. As the most infamous lady in high society, people recognizing me wasn't a surprise.

Uncomfortable, I decided to ask him to let go of me so we could head somewhere else. "Hey, we can stop—"

He interrupted me. "There's something I have to let you know, my lady," he said. "About that contract you mentioned..."

I still had goosebumps from when he first started behaving politely, but now another issue plagued me. Startled, I covered his mouth with my hands to prevent him from continuing. “You want to discuss the payment you’ll receive from Father, right?” I asked, bluffing. He could only be referring to one *contract*, and that had to be the proposal I once made to initiate a contractual relationship. He probably had an answer for me, but I couldn’t have such an important conversation occur in such a crowded place. Others could be listening.

“Follow me,” I instructed, dragging him toward my carriage by our clasped hands. “Here, get in.”

Instead of getting in like I directed, however, he regarded me gently. “Why don’t you get in first, my lady?” he asked, and his unexpected offer made me feel incredibly strange. Did he become a little kinder?

Once we got in and the carriage door had closed behind us, I resumed our discussion. “Before, on that day... why did you leave without saying anything?” His upset expression at the time bothered me, and I had wondered about it since then. Did he hate the idea of being in a contractual relationship with me that much? He should’ve rejected me on the spot if that was the case. I could’ve started brainstorming ideas on how to run away, instead...

He gazed at me arrogantly then tilted his head back as if he couldn’t bear the sight of me any longer. “That’s none of your business,” he said.

I knew it. It was impossible for someone to change so easily.



“I have something urgent to discuss with him, so please refrain from staying too close to the carriage,” Jubelian said. Despite ordering her escort knights with a firm, decisive tone, she didn’t sound too forceful. Max gazed at Jubelian, ruminating on her pleasant voice.

Jubelian had always been excessively considerate toward him, which had made her seem somewhat naive. Now, however, she acted with refinement

befitting her status as the only daughter of a duke, bowing to none but the imperial family. Bearing witness, Max no longer worried over someone potentially taking advantage of her kindness.

“Although I trust you all, there will be consequences if someone eavesdrops on our conversation,” she continued. The sight of her exercising her authority was an unfamiliar one, but it relieved Max. She wouldn’t get sucked into any trouble, at the very least.

Jubelian met his gaze after they ensured their privacy. “Before, on that day... why did you leave without saying anything?” she asked.

The question flustered him despite the fact that he was rarely the type to find himself taken aback. *Shit*—what should he say? She had told him that she was planning on running away should she be forced to marry the crown prince. He couldn’t tell her the truth—that he was the crown prince in question—because she would end up fleeing.

“That’s none of your business,” he said somberly, burdened by the thought of her running from him.

She let out a sigh instead of pressing him for an explanation. “Alright,” she said. “Then, what’s your answer for my proposal?”

Max hesitated. There was something that had been bothering him ever since she first brought the subject up: why did she want to start a contractual relationship with *him* specifically? “There is something I need to ask you before I decide,” he began, hoping the stifling feeling inside of him would dissipate once he heard her reasons.

“Okay, go ahead.”

“Why did you pick me for something like that?”

“By *something like that*... do you mean the contractual relationship?”

“Yes,” Max responded, clenching his fists. He was wrought with an unknown source of tension. Jubelian’s expression hardened.

“That’s because... you’re Father’s precious disciple?”

Contrary to his expectations, she praised neither his appearance nor his

swordsmanship skills. He scrunched his face up at the absurdity of her answer. She wanted to date him for such a trivial reason? Disappointment and anger inexplicably surged within him. He couldn't believe he was wasting his time with a woman like her...

If Jubelian were anyone else, he would've angrily lashed out at her for trying to use him, but he found himself unable to do so because... well, he was looking at her. The longer he gazed at her, the more he felt his irritation subside. Why on earth was he being swayed... by a woman like her?

Consumed by a sense of shame, Max frowned, his eyes downcast.

"I also have another reason..."

When he looked up, he saw her smiling sweetly.

"You're the only person I'm comfortable enough with to ask this favor from," she finished.

Comfortable... Max felt the same about her. "I see," he said.

His sour mood immediately dissipated upon hearing that she felt the same way. Now filled with joy, his heart fluttered warmly. He had more he wanted to ask, but he didn't want to think about them anymore. Yes. This was good enough.

Without realizing it, Max smiled.



Suddenly, I saw him smile. Why? Nevertheless, it gave me a pleasant feeling for some reason.

Well, it was no secret that he was handsome. Although I didn't want to admit it, I couldn't help but acknowledge that he was my type. He might've had a vile personality, but I wouldn't mind being in a relationship with someone with a face like that.

Then, I realized that I still hadn't gotten an answer from him.

“I answered your question, so shouldn’t you answer mine now?”

He nodded and said, “Alright. I’ll accept your request.”

I smiled brightly, relieved that I had finally found a way to avoid my predestined death. “Thank you. How much do you want for compensation?”

He furrowed his brows. “I don’t need any,” he said, his voice cold. “I’m just doing this to pay back what I owe you.”

This almost had me picturing him as an angel. Now that I was trying to save money and stay aware of my finances, this would help me sustain an independent lifestyle in the future. So what if he was ill-mannered? He was kind.

I wrapped my hands around his, deeply moved. “Thank you. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Okay. I get it, so let go of my hands,” he said, scowling.

I had no intention of letting go, however. “What do you mean? We have to act like lovers from now on... it will be difficult to explain if you act halfheartedly!”

Because my life depended on this humorless act, I... I swallowed the last part of my sentence and stared at him steadily as I continued. “Now that we’ve decided to be in a contractual relationship, you must hold hands with me, lock arms with me, and address me affectionately,” I explained. “Do you understand?” Silent, he wore a hardened expression. “Say something,” I said.

He sighed. “Alright,” he quietly muttered. I gave a half-smile and moved on to discuss another essential aspect involved in the start of a legitimate relationship.

“By the way, I don’t think you know my name yet, but—”

“Jubelian,” he said clearly, interrupting me. My eyes widened in surprise. “I know what your name is.”

I wanted to tell him what my name was because he always referred to me as ‘you,’ so I thought he was just as clueless about me as I was of him, but... he knew? My heart shook at his earnest voice, but then an upsetting realization

dawned on me: if he knew my name all along, why didn't he ever use it?

Nevertheless, another problem needed to be addressed. "I still don't know your name. I've asked for it before, but you've never answered me. Could you tell me now?"

I spoke carefully so as to not hurt his feelings. Fortunately, he didn't seem offended. A brief silence ensued before he opened his mouth to answer.

"It's... Max," he said.

Max. If I were to find fault with this name, it would be that it was a little too close to the crown prince's name. Nevertheless, it didn't have a bad meaning.

"That's a good name. Your parents must've wanted you to become a great person," I said.

He stared at me for a while. "Yeah," he finally said.

I thought he was going to look away from me again like he did before, but he continued to hold my gaze with his red, sunset-hued eyes. I felt strange for some reason, so I decided to change the subject.

"Hey, about—"

He interrupted me. "Didn't we just decide to call each other by our names?"

I smiled awkwardly because he had caught me off guard. "We did, Max," I conceded. A soft smile appeared on his face after I said his name.

I watched him for a while before deciding to get down to business. "Why don't we write out an official contract?" I suggested.

At the word '*contract*,' he pulled a face and glared at me. "A contract? Would writing such a thing be necessary? I clearly remember telling you that I didn't want to be compensated for this," he said.

I sighed. What did Father teach him, if not common sense? What if he got scammed by someone? I decided to assume the position of an instructor to help this pure, innocent man in front of me. "Every deal you make must be officially written out," I began. "If you don't do that, people will think you're a pushover and take advantage of you. I mean, they could refuse to compensate you or they could do bad things in your name."

Although I could tell he was listening to me, he still looked clueless. *Ugh*, should I explain it all to him again? I sighed, contemplating whether or not I should use simpler words so he could understand me.

“But you won’t do that to me,” he said sincerely. He spoke with such conviction it made me feel strange.

Until now, no one had ever trusted me... I had been living my role as a villainess, so the hatred I accrued had been a natural thing. A given. No one had ever confided in me before, either—not even Father. In the novel, Jubelian had pleaded for him to trust her, but he ignored her and threw her in prison anyway. However, Max’s red eyes were focused on me, wholly doubtless. An odd feeling arose within me, tugging at the depths of my heart.

Ah, but this wasn’t the right time to be zoning out. I barely managed to compose myself. “Scams are so effective because they’re usually done by people you trust!” I insisted.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, that’s why no matter how close you are with someone, you shouldn’t just hold them accountable. Don’t just take their word for it. Make them write an official contract, okay?”

He nodded, sighing at my continued nagging. “Alright.”

His obedient response only made me more worried, though. This guy was really naive and ignorant of worldly affairs... would he be able to handle this unkind reality?

I was originally concerned about his fearsome personability, but now I was worried about his carelessness and ignorance. After mulling over my concerns for a while, I made a promise to myself: while in a contractual relationship with him, I should teach him about a lot of things. In truth, I felt bad that he had refused payment, so I could repay the favor by teaching him life lessons.

“Before we write the contract, let’s come to terms about the most important thing.”

“And what’s that?” he asked.

I had been thinking about this for a while. “Geraldine is the leader of the escort knights. So, judging from his personality, he’s definitely going to interrogate us on how we met. We can’t tell him the truth, so we should make up a story we can both agree on.”

“Ah... I see.”

Even he couldn’t deny my reasoning. After all, our first meeting involved trespassing, threats, and a sword.

“So, I was thinking... how about this story?” I told him a scenario I had been concocting for a while, but he quickly raised his voice against it.

“What? No, I absolutely hate it!”

I could tell he loathed my scheme just by looking at him. “Could you come up with anything better, then?” I asked sternly.

“Can’t we switch roles? What if I’m the one who—”

I cut him off. “No, that wouldn’t make any sense. You know I’m always surrounded by knights.” I studied him as I fell into deep thought. Then, I took his hands and held them tightly. “It might be daunting now, but it won’t mean anything later,” I insisted, coaxing. “If it’s still too difficult for you, you can just stand beside me and let me take the lead.”

He nodded with a blank expression. “Alright.”

Opening the carriage door, I walked out with him. “Make your hand on my shoulder more obvious,” I whispered quietly. His hand, which had rested awkwardly atop my shoulder, promptly covered its entirety. “Good job,” I praised him.

He remained silent. Although I hadn’t expected him to put on a convincing act in the first place, I felt a little frustrated. I guess I had no choice but to bear the bulk of this task.

The escort knights waiting for me seemed to be taken aback by the sight of us posing as a couple as we came out of the carriage. Geraldine, in particular, observed me as he pressed his fingers against his temples.

“Could you please explain what in the world is happening here, my lady?” he

asked. As expected, he immediately began interrogating me about our relationship.

“What I said earlier was actually a lie, Sir Geraldine,” I confessed.

He nodded as if he had already known. “*Ah*, yes. Of course. His Grace would never assign an outsider a task without letting me know.” He studied me with a probing gaze before continuing. “So, who is that man and why is he allowed to treat you so intimately?” he asked coldly.

“He’s my boyfriend,” I announced confidently.



Max’s hand felt hot as it rested upon her small shoulder.

“Good job,” she muttered.

Although he was aware of the fact that she had spoken, he was too preoccupied with worrying over whether or not she could hear the rapid beat of his heart to truly listen. She wouldn’t notice it, would she? To ensure her ignorance, he tried to restrain himself with focused intensity.

At that moment, a disobliging voice met his ears.

“So, who is that man and why is he allowed to treat you so intimately?”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

As soon as Jubelian finished the sentence, angry protests erupted around them.

“What? How could you say that, my lady?!”

“We have always escorted you closely, but we’ve never seen a man like him.”

Max removed his trembling hand from Jubelian’s shoulder and clenched his fists. How annoying. He thought of her guards as eyesores and resented how they were permitted to be around her in the first place. Furthermore, it was ridiculous that these men dared to show such blatant hostility toward him.

Suddenly, Jubelian placed her hand atop his.

“It will be alright,” she whispered, bearing a light smile. The moment he saw her face, his sizzling anger gradually subsided. His heart tingled, seeming to swell.

She turned back to the knights. “It’s a given none of you know about him. I met him at Count Meissen’s banquet, which was held quite a while ago.” The knights stared at Max with disbelief in their eyes.

No way. Was Max a nobleman? Geraldine could tell he was well-off despite being dressed in shabby clothes...

Count Meissen was known for holding banquets with guests who only came from reputable, aristocratic families. If the man in front of them had attended such an event, he was probably an esteemed son from a renowned house. What family was he from? Geraldine had never seen him in the capital before.

Geraldine observed Max with sharp eyes.

“He’s no noble; he’s a mercenary that had been hired to compensate for the lack of guards,” Jubelian said. The knights narrowed their eyes at the word *mercenary*.

“I wonder why a mere mercenary would approach our lady,” Geraldine said. The other knights’ eyes were filled with condescension.

Max scowled. How dare a few lowly knights regard him in such a way. The immediate urge to draw his sword, displaying his strength and superiority, soared within him. Nevertheless, the hand that held him, anchoring him in place, was so warm that his irritation couldn’t help but disappear. Jubelian’s touch stopped him. How did he end up like this?

Max blazed with heat. Oblivious to this, Jubelian began to counter Geraldine’s accusation.

“We met each other during a critical situation,” she said.

When the knights heard the phrase *critical situation*, their aggression calmed somewhat. *Ah*, so this man saved their lady during a serious encounter...

However, Jubelian’s next explanation had the knights doubting their hearing.

“I saved him from being surrounded and cornered by a hoard of noblewomen.”

“I’m sorry? You saved him, my lady?”

“Yes. They all ran away when I asked them about Mikhail’s whereabouts.” The women probably ran away because Jubelian was infamous for committing wicked acts toward people who approached Mikhail. “Afterwards, he told me he wanted to return the favor, saying that he owed me his life. Although I declined his offer and continued to search for Mikhail, I couldn’t stop thinking about him. He was the reason I broke up with Mikhail in the end.”

The knights looked simply astonished.

“When we met again here at Arcade Street today, it was as if we had met by destiny. I was certain that he was the person for me,” Jubelian continued. “None of you understand how moved I was when I found out that he had been looking for me as well.”

Her story flustered the knights for a while. Then, they gave Max a sinister look. How dare a commoner do such a thing. It was understandable that Jubelian thought and acted this way since she was someone who exhibited no awareness when she was blindly in love, but they couldn’t help but think that it was absurd for a commoner to attempt to court the daughter of a duke. He didn’t know his place.

Max realized that the knights were trying to intimidate him by giving him menacing looks. It was irritating. Baron Gordon had already drained him of patience not long ago, so it wasn’t an exaggeration to say his current composure ought to be considered a miracle. He had never bothered to endure people who treated him with blatant belligerence before.

Right. He should just stomp on these bugs for thinking they could intimidate him.

After coming to this decision, he conveyed his antagonism through a glare. The knights, receiving his sharp, vicious energy head-on, flinched and instinctively reached for their swords.

Who... was this man?

Through the sheer force he had emitted, they could tell he was someone who walked the path of swordsmanship rather than knightship. He was strong. Where did a man like him suddenly come from? His gaze was so dangerous that it ignited the knights' impulse to draw their swords and prepare themselves for an opponent's attack. However, they couldn't act rashly because Jubelian stood right next to him.

A cold voice broke the silence.

"Excuse me," Jubelian said. "Are you guys threatening my boyfriend?"

We're the ones being threatened! the knights lamented silently in response. Feeling as if he was being treated unfairly, one knight tried to confess the truth. "That's not it, my lady..."

He trailed off when Jubelian narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean by that? Did you think I couldn't see the frightening expressions you all were making at him?"

"That's a misunderstanding, Jubelian. What happened just now—" Geraldine tried to tell her that there was someone even more frightening behind her, but Jubelian continued to rattle on without giving him any more time to explain himself.

"He's so terrified that his hands are shaking!" she exclaimed.

Max, who was standing behind Jubelian, smirked at her defense of him. The sight appalled the knights. They desperately wanted to implore her to look behind her, but Jubelian's gaze remained steadfastly fixed upon them.

"As a group of people daring to intimidate a single person, you're the same as the noblewomen back then. You all should be ashamed!"

The knights tried to suppress their dissatisfaction as she spoke sternly, recalling the duke's orders. "*Please protect my daughter,*" he had said. Until now, the knights had guarded Jubelian wordlessly due to their loyalty to the duke. It was part of their job to frighten others, so they truly believed that this situation was unjust. They hadn't done anything wrong.

"My lady, we really..." Todd began, but he trailed off when Jubelian turned around as if she couldn't even bear to spare the knights another glance.

“Are you okay?” she asked Max.

He nodded slowly. “Yes, my lady.”

The man who had been bombarding the knights with a bloodthirsty gaze suddenly hid his hostility, feigning innocence before the lady.

Seriously, what kind of person did that? The knights gaped in astonishment and couldn’t help but wonder if the man had deliberately set up that banquet just to get close to Jubelian.

“My lady, that man—”

Geraldine tried to warn her, but Jubelian held Max’s hand tightly and glared at the knights. “Just know that we’ll be going back to the mansion for now,” she said coldly. Then, she turned to Max, lowering her voice to whisper. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you no matter what.”

Max furrowed his brows. Then, he let out a sigh. A weakling like her... protecting him? Everything she was saying sounded preposterous, but for some reason, he didn’t mind it or the warmth of her hands around his, no matter how nonsensical.



When we arrived at the mansion, the butler looked at Max with surprise. “My lady, how did you come back with...?”

Perhaps it was because he knew Max was Father’s disciple, but Derrick was unable to continue his sentence. Well, if I’m going to tell everyone anyway, I should make it clear at the start.

“He’s my guest,” I said.

I couldn’t tell what Derrick was thinking after hearing me say that, but he sighed. “Ah, I see. Then I’ll take him to the drawing room—”

I interrupted him. “He’s also my boyfriend.”

Clang!

At the sound of something falling to the ground, I turned around and saw Father looking at us with an astounded expression.

“Jubelian, what did you just...” He trailed off.

On one hand, I felt nervous since the very situation I had been planning for had finally arrived. On the other hand, I felt hopeful because I could finally get rid of a problem that had been bothering me this entire time.

I wore a satisfied smile. “Max, say hello. This is Father.”

Father’s expression hardened. “Jubelian, what did you just say?” he asked. I had never seen his eyes look so ferocious before. He almost looked barbaric, which was unlike someone who usually seemed indifferent about everything.

A person who never cared about anything I ever did, no matter how much trouble I caused, was suddenly getting all upset like this... it inspired something in me: a small urge to rebel. He was probably furious that I refused to be his puppet and comply with the arranged marriage he set up for me, straying from him to tempt his disciple instead.

I proudly locked arms with Max. “I said we’re officially starting a relationship.”

Father glared at me in response. “Come inside first, then we’ll talk,” he then said quietly.

Geraldine and the knights believed my lies because they were rather naive, but if I tried the same with Father, I was bound to get caught. Because of this, I needed to mix some truth into my story.

Would I be able to pull it off? I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous, but I didn’t want to have any doubts at the moment. “It’ll be okay. I can do it,” I promised, trying to encourage myself.

Suddenly, the arm locked around mine loosened. Max had unfastened his hold on me. Didn’t I ask for his cooperation? I tried to give him a look to convey this, but he ended up surprising me instead. He had removed his arm so he could hold my hand.

“Let’s go... my lady,” he said. Although he sounded a bit awkward, I didn’t mind because he had addressed me formally.

Was it because he was with me? For some reason, the thought of being scolded today didn't frighten me.



How did it end up like this? Regis clenched his fists, realizing that he should have exercised more vigilance in keeping his sly disciple away from his daughter. *What on earth are you scheming, Maximilian?* Regis seethed silently.

He was certain that Max had planned this situation with wicked intentions, knowing full well the depths to which his disciple's inhumane and evil nature reached. The reason he wanted to get close to Jubelian was probably...

Does he want to get me involved in the rebellion by using Jubel? Regis questioned to himself. As his uncertain guesses grew clearer and clearer, a smug smile slowly began to appear on his face.

"Master, you need to know the right time to let your pawns go," his disciple had once told him. *"It's common sense to make some sacrifices during a revolution."*

Max was someone who saw people as pieces upon a chessboard, so it was possible he harbored intentions even more wicked than Regis had originally predicted. How dare that man consider his daughter a pawn... although his speculations weren't confirmed, Regis couldn't help but feel enraged. His disciple had already made a move.

That scoundrel. This was how Max pay him back after all he'd done by becoming his enemy? Although their relationship hadn't been built on pure intentions, he had never hesitated to give his disciple advice because he valued Max at heart. Regis had even protected him from the assassins sent by the empress when he was young, but it seemed like all those supportive efforts had gone to waste.

I can't let a monster like you take my daughter away from me, Regis swore, gritting his teeth in disgust. Although he really wanted to punish his ungrateful disciple, he knew that Jubelian would be unhappy if he did so, considering how

she seemed to cherish the people and things she valued.

How irritating.

Regis felt as if his head was going to burst, but he carefully masked his feelings and offered his daughter and disciple a seat. "Sit down," he said.

Right as Jubelian was about to sit, Max pulled a chair out for her. "Here."

She smiled. "Thank you."

If he had been the disciple that Regis had come to know, he wouldn't have been affected by her words at all. Nonetheless, the despicable man replied meekly. "Sure," he murmured.

That spiteful rogue. He tricked Jubelian by putting on an act. Regis clenched his fists, embittered. Having observed Max for a long time, he knew that things rarely affected him. Once, he had even once said: *"You want me to show compassion to the weak? That will only get me beheaded."*

Regis had tried to soften his disciple's personality on numerous occasions, but he only became more perverse with time. There was no way a guy like him could change so suddenly.

"How did you two meet?" Regis asked coldly, speaking as if to interrogate. An aura of aggression emanated from his eyes.

"During the last few days you've been gone, he came to visit you," Jubelian began. "Since you weren't here and there was no place else for him to go, I let him stay in my room for a while."

Unable to suppress his anger, Regis' face twisted. So that was why that vile snake lured him to the imperial palace!

Although she seemed mostly expressionless, his daughter had possessed a soft heart from a young age.

"I don't want these birds anymore, so don't catch them, okay?" she had once told Derrick, mourning the death of her pet bird. She had only been seven years old.

She was the type of kid who could never ignore abandoned dogs and cats she spotted on the streets. She was lenient toward the weak and pitiable, and Regis

knew it. Bearing in mind that truth, Max's crimes grew even more infuriating. Regis could never forgive his disciple for taking advantage of his daughter's kindness.

"Why didn't you ask Derrick? He could've taken you to a guest room," Regis said, leveling Max with a murderous gaze. Although his question was clearly directed toward his disciple, Jubelian responded instead.

"It had been very late at night, so I felt awkward alerting anyone since the knights had already come by," she said. "Also, I assumed he wouldn't hurt me because he was your disciple, Father."

Regis sighed softly in response. In truth, Max was the most dangerous man she could have met... he used whatever means necessary to accomplish his own ends. In Regis' eyes, he was no different from an outrageous tyrant. With that atrocious mentality of his, he wouldn't think twice before inflicting danger upon her as soon as she displeased him or as soon as he had drained her of her worth.

Jubelian probably didn't know that her life was now at risk.

Nevertheless, Regis couldn't blame his precious daughter. The reason she had presented him for letting Max into her room—the fact that Max was his disciple—was a valid one. After all, it was probably his fault from the start. He never should have taken Max under his wing...

He sipped his well-brewed tea. Its fragrance was pleasant and mellow, but he could only taste bitterness in his mouth.

"That was inappropriate of you, considering her reputation," he said coldly, criticizing Max for treating Jubelian inconsiderately.

Once again, she replied in Max's stead. "You probably know this already, Father, but I don't care that much about my reputation," she said. Although Regis' heart ached at the things the exaggerated rumors said about his daughter, he didn't care much about them, either. No matter what others thought, he knew that his daughter was a kind and lovely person.

Jubelian straightened up and looked straight at Regis, continuing her speech. "Still, I took extreme care because I was afraid of causing you any trouble.

Nothing had actually happened between us,” she said. Regis was taken aback by the look of vigor in her eyes. “I’m embarrassed to say this, but up until now, I’ve only been in a one-sided relationship. I honestly think it’s a miracle that someone I like now likes me back.” She sighed, voice suddenly soft. “Father, you might not trust me because of all the problems I’ve caused up until now, but I swear I’ll never disgrace our family’s prestigious name. So, please allow us to date.”

Regis had originally planned to declare their relationship thoroughly impossible to permit, but as he listened to his daughter’s desperate pleas, a soft spot began to arise within him.

How could... how could she manage to weaken him like this?

She was the apple of his eye. Regis truly wanted to do everything he could for her, but the terrible existence she had become attached to forbade him.

He gathered his wits about him. “I can’t allow this,” he said resolutely. “End the relationship.”



I understood. He had already made up his mind on my marriage with the crown prince.

I sighed. An arranged marriage between a crazy, tyrannical crown prince and a duke’s only daughter. Other nobles might’ve considered having the prince as their son-in-law as well, but they would never go as far as to make it a reality. Father was a transcendent being, however, so he looked much younger than his actual age. He could probably marry again and bear another successor in the near future if he so wished. He could start over whenever he wanted.

It made sense that he would prefer to trade with the royal family rather than give his foolish daughter a fresh start. After all, it was simply the most advantageous choice available to him. What should I do now, though? If I opposed him, he would certainly push the marriage all the sooner. I sighed in frustration, hanging my head low, when someone suddenly grasped my hand

tightly.

“I don’t want to,” Max’s firm voice said. It sounded wholly unlike my own timid personality.

Huh? I glanced at Max with surprise. He met my eyes briefly before glaring back at Father.

“Do you remember that time you lectured me, Master?” he asked sternly. Then, he suddenly lifted me out of my chair. Or, more accurately, he had lifted me into his arms.

What was this guy trying to do? I gave him a frantic look, but he continued to stare ahead, his expression akin to sculpted ice.

“I think I’ve found it,” he continued. “My weakness.”

In response to his oddly familiar claim, Father’s expression hardened even further, irrevocably acerbic. “You’re doing a good job jabbering about something that’s not even true.”

“Then what about you, Master? Your daughter’s fully grown, yet you’re so overbearing.” I hadn’t expected much acting from Max, but he spoke so convincingly, so coldly, that it almost seemed like his role had sucked him in somehow. “If you meddle with my weakness again, master or not, I won’t stand by,” he continued.

At that, I gasped sharply. He should’ve spoken more moderately; that was too much! I carefully watched their growing spite for each other, unable to stop them.

Father smiled harshly. “Alright, if you say so,” he said. “I won’t think of you as my disciple anymore.”

Was he trying to cut ties with his only disciple? I was shocked and appalled by Father’s words, unable to believe that he would ruin their precious relationship just because of me.

As if he had expected Father’s reaction, Max remained indifferent. “That’s just what I’d like,” he said.

Watching these two clash made me confused. Why were they fighting all of a

sudden? To sever ties with each other completely like this... I hadn't expected such a development. I had no idea what to do.

Max turned to me. "Let's go, Jubelian."

He must've been fully immersed in mastering the skill of method acting.

When we reached the door, I suddenly became conscious of what I was doing. No matter how I looked at it, this situation... it was like an elopement, wasn't it?

Although eloping sounded nice, my partner was homeless and poor. My original plan was to show Father that we were dating so he wouldn't marry me off to the crown prince. I thought it would work because he seemed to care for his disciple a lot, but he opposed strongly, effectively ruining my plans.

I needed to stop Max. I had considered running away at some point, but that was the worst-case scenario. My ultimate goal was to inherit Father's money and become so rich that I wouldn't have to lift a finger. If I left with him like this, I wouldn't even be able to gather any of my valuables and, in the end, Father would only drag me back. That was the last thing I wanted.

"Hey, I—" I tried to speak up and get Max to stop, but Father interrupted me.

"Stop."

I flinched at the sound of his icy voice. It was clearly a warning. Oh, he was probably angry.

"I said stop," he repeated.

If we didn't listen to him this time, I had a feeling that I, too, would become Father's enemy. "Max, wait a minute—"

I attempted to stop Max again, but he spoke over me. "Don't order me around," he said callously.

I stiffened. This wasn't right. No matter how grim our relationship was, Father was still Father. It didn't feel pleasant to have someone treat him so rudely. I looked back at him, and along with his frigid countenance, he looked exasperated. If I chose to keep quiet now, I knew I would get in trouble.

Father clenched his fists and, at that moment, I called out to him urgently. "Father!" The ferocious gaze he had directed at Max shifted over to me. "I'll

take care of it,” I said.

Although I knew he thought of me as unreliable, I desperately hoped that he would trust me this time. I couldn't bear to say any more, so I gazed at him earnestly instead. Whether he had seen through my silent prayers or decided to give up on his good-for-nothing daughter, he sighed and let us go. Max passed him by triumphantly, most likely under the assumption I had taken his side. When we left the drawing room and passed through a quiet hallway, there was no one nearby.

I grabbed Max's shirt. “Please let me go for a second. I have something to say.” He frowned as if to protest, but I looked him in the eyes. “Come on, now,” I said calmly. “It's something very important.”

My feet soon touched the floor. “So, what is it that you want to say?” he asked, his tone disinterested.

“Thank you for getting angry on my behalf, but what you said to Father back there was too much,” I said.

His handsome face crumpled at my statement. “But I helped you...”

Well, I understood why he was upset. He had defended me with good intentions, but I still scolded him despite it all, so he had every right to feel offended. Nevertheless, I couldn't let his rudeness slide.

“Are you really helping me by doing something I disapprove of?” I asked.

“What?” he exclaimed. He sounded like he had just heard something ridiculous.

I shook my head at his reaction. “I never wanted you to be exiled. Nor did I ever want you to be rude to Father.”

Judging from how he was glaring at me and murmuring to himself, he must've been angry at me. Despite his fierce, aggressive, and animalistic gaze, however, I continued without hesitation. “Forcefully doing something against someone's wishes isn't helping them,” I explained. “That's just pushing forward for your own satisfaction.”

I fell silent and stared at his flickering eyes, which looked like flames. He

opened his mouth after a moment of silence. "So, you don't need my help anymore?" he asked.

"Of course, I need your help, but if you're just going to act on your own, I'll have no choice but to resort to a different solution."

His expression darkened slightly. As he became lost in thought, I realized how naive and childlike he was, reminding me of my past self.

I usually wouldn't bother with lengthy explanations like this, but why was this moment an exception? Was it because he seemed similar to who I used to be? Even I was puzzled by my behavior.

I let out a sigh. "I'm not saying this because I want to distance myself from you. I want to be with you for a long time and get to know you better. I'm only saying these things so that we won't have any lingering resentment between us."

"I was trying to help you back there," he insisted.

"I know, but Father is a duke. If you consider all the future problems he could cause, what you did wasn't very helpful."

A brief moment of silence followed. Max broke it with a deep exhale. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"I want you to make up with Father."

He paused. "Make up?" He looked puzzled. It was as if he was unfamiliar with the phrase.

"In order to reconcile, someone needs to apologize first."

Max pulled a face. "Apologize? Are you saying I should apologize first?"

I gazed at him understandingly. "I know," I sighed, deflating. "It'll hurt your pride and make you feel like you lost. Isn't that just terrible?"

He nodded slowly.

I shouldn't force them to make peace. This was my problem to begin with, after all. Although it was unfortunate they had estranged themselves from each other, I didn't plan to coerce him into apologizing if he didn't want to. I had

already caused a big problem by telling Father I didn't want to go meet with the crown prince, but something was bound to work out eventually.

"That's why I don't plan on pressuring you to apologize," I continued. "You don't have to forc—"

He cut me off. "Alright," he said. "I will."

Surprised by his unexpected acquiescence, I grasped his hands tightly. "Thank you," I said, a bright smile gracing my lips.



Transcendent beings had senses that easily surpassed those of ordinary people. For example, Regis would easily be able to detect a rat scattering around the building if there was one. As he listened to Jubelian and Max out in the hallway, he could feel a headache approaching.

He changed his mind? All because of Jubelian?

His disciple, the crown prince, was rude, arrogant, and self-centered. However, the behavior he just exhibited differed drastically from his behavior over the past decade.

"If you meddle with my weakness again, master or not, I won't stand by," he had said.

Regis narrowed his eyes. Did Max really change?

Such thoughts, however, were fleeting. Max returned to the drawing room with blatant enmity gleaming in his eyes, so Regis had to discard his musings.

Right. There was no way he could change.

In the past, Max had always tried to hide his weaknesses instead of accepting them. *"People will laugh if they discover that the imperial prince hates cucumbers,"* he had once said. Thus, it was impossible for someone like him to accept someone like Jubelian as a weakness and openly admit to it.

The bottom line is that he's going to try to take advantage of my daughter

until the very end... Regis reminded himself, staring at his disciple with an eerie gaze. Did Max think he was just going to sit around and watch as things played out? There was a significant difference in the swordsmanship skills between a master and his pupil. He could make his arrogant disciple kneel before him if he wanted to, but Regis was soon forced to quell his merciless seething.

“Max has something to say, Father,” Jubelian said.

His boiling blood ceased the moment he noticed his daughter by his disciple’s side, but he still had no intention to forgive him. Regis would put up with him for now, but he would never let him go if he tried to manipulate her again.

Max, sensing the warning in his master’s eyes, smirked. This confirmed the fact that his blind date with Jubelian as the crown prince was a prediction born of false premises. It didn’t make sense for his master to institute such a thing in the first place, seeing as he had always acted cautiously and quietly when it came to his daughter. Max hadn’t even known about it, either, and given the precarious position he was in as the crown prince, there was no way someone like the duke would’ve tried to get his daughter involved.

That was why Max used Jubelian to coax a reaction from his master about their relationship, and, sure enough, his master had responded with a firm rejection.

So, Jubelian had misunderstood things, after all... Max’s eyes gleamed coldly. He had a better grasp on things now, but he had no reason to clear up this misunderstanding. If they were to find out the truth, his master would only listen to his daughter’s wishes, making it so that Max could no longer see her.

“Then, I must run away,” she had once said.

Max didn’t care in the slightest if people tarnished his name and called him a bloodthirsty devil since he considered his survival of greater importance than his reputation, but the thought of Jubelian misunderstanding him from the rumors had him feeling strangely upset. Heartbroken, even. However, if he revealed that he was the crown prince after being nice to her for a while first, showing her that he was different from the rumors, then he could clear her misconceptions away. For this reason, Max decided to linger around Jubelian longer. Therefore, he had to say the things she wanted him to say.

“I apologize for what happened earlier, Master,” he said.

Regis smiled smugly when Max called him by the title he had just discarded. “Master, hm? But I don’t have any disciples,” he said.

Max frowned at the duke’s decisive claim. Oh, so he was going to play it like this? He wanted to feign remorse for Jubelian’s sake, but his master’s unwavering and obstinate attitude damaged his pride. Whatever he had been trying to accomplish, he felt like he simply couldn’t do it anymore.

Max opened his mouth. “I—”

At that moment, Jubelian kneeled on the floor, causing both Regis and Max astonishment. “It’s my fault, Father,” she confessed.



I sighed as I watched the overaggressive dispute between Father and his disciple. These guys... I doubted their ability to reconcile. At this rate, they were just going to continue wasting time, so I decided to resort to extreme measures.

I would just say that everything was my fault, beg for forgiveness, and then inform him that I planned to continue dating Max. With this in mind, I kneeled on the ground. It was probably better than standing stiffly. Kneeling didn’t actually feel that bad because of the carpet.

At that moment, I heard Max’s stern voice ring out. “Jubelian, I’m the one who should apologize!” he shouted, aghast.

I frowned. “Max, I—”

“Get up.”

“Right now, I—”

“Get up now! I’m going to apologize!”

I couldn’t believe how tactless he was being! I frowned at him and his relentless demands. “I have something important to say to Father...” I trailed off.

Father spoke out from above me. “I understand,” he said. “Get up first, then we can discuss this.”

It was odd how the two of them had suddenly become agreeable with each other. What was up with them?

I was confused for a moment, but then I remembered that I hadn’t achieved my goal yet. I couldn’t let my guard down until Father forgave him. Right now, my goal was to convince Father to take back what he had said about exiling Max. Instead of getting up, I shook my head and answered, “Father, it’s my fault that Max is being impolite right now. So, please forgive him with an open heart —”

Before I could finish, Father nodded his head. “Yes, I forgive him. Now, get up.”

Huh? That easily? Feeling somewhat discouraged, I glanced up at Father.

Max held his hand out to me. “Here,” he said.

I took in his warmth as I clasped his hand. He helped me onto my feet and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. It was a strange feeling having a person who used to be so cold to me now gently reach out to me.

He had become more human, it seemed.

I stared blankly at our connected hands, and as I did so, Father spoke up, his voice a complete chill. “However, this doesn’t mean that I’m permitting your relationship.”

I sighed at his firm denial. Yeah, I knew it wasn’t going to be that easy.



Regis gazed at his daughter sorrowfully. This was his fault. Since his current circumstances didn’t allow him to show his daughter affection, he wanted to do everything he could for her, but there was one thing he couldn’t allow no matter what, it seemed.

He couldn't let Max have her.

Max was a crown prince distrusted by his father, the emperor. His situation was as precarious as a candle's flame against the wind. Due to all the malicious rumors going around about him, most of the nobility lacked faith in him. Furthermore, following her successful takeover of the legislative body, the empress sent assassins after him while manipulating the public's opinion about the empire. The rumors she spread about him painted him out to be a tyrant who shed neither blood nor tears, viewing his allies solely as pawns.

To top it all off, however, was that Max seemed to be becoming the same cold-blooded person the rumors described.

"Duke Floyen, I'm not saying you should stand by him. Please do him a favor just this once," the empress had once said. Both as Max's master and to satisfy his debt to the empress, he had attempted to humanize Max multiple times. However, his efforts merely resulted in cynicism.

"Isn't it more efficient for the many to benefit from the sacrifices of the few?" his disciple had once asked.

If Jubelian married Max, a cold-blooded man who viewed people as objects, her future would be obvious.

With a fierce look in his eyes, Regis glared at his disciple. What a fool. It was careless to consider one's pawns useless. Over the years, he had witnessed thousands of cases wherein people held intrinsic value that should never be sacrificed. Someone who had terrible swordsmanship could prove unique in their resourcefulness, and someone who looked average on the outside could exhibit the leadership required to boost a group's morale. Pawns could be promoted to queens once they reached the other side of the chessboard. Regis knew that everyone had room to grow and improve.

If Jubelian married a man who didn't value his people, she would only end up walking a thorny path.

"I'm not asking for your permission right now, Father," she said. "Keep an eye on us before deciding on your decision. Just for a while. Please."

Gazing into her periwinkle eyes, Regis listened to her faint but strong voice.

He could tell that she was determined. Even if he continued to refuse, she would still keep dating him, he realized.

It was said that parents have a soft spot for their children and Regis was no exception. He wouldn't be able to reason his daughter out of her decision.

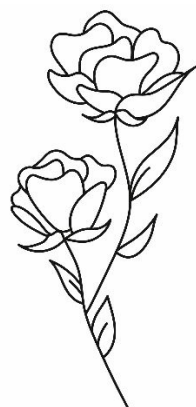
Like Mikhail, she would probably break up with him once she became put off by him. A little ripple would be enough to open her eyes.

Knowing this, Regis changed tactics. Instead of pursuing his staunch refusal, he would slowly reveal to her Max's true character.

"Alright," he said.

Ignorant of her father's ulterior motives, Jubelian beamed. "Thank you, Father."

Regis' heart ached at his daughter's innocent expression. *I'm sorry, but... this is all to protect you*, he promised silently.



Will the Contract Work?

“Um, Father. I have something I want to talk to Max about... can we go?” I asked.

He had agreed to wait and keep an eye on us, but was that because he had not allowed us to date yet? He stared at us bitterly and nodded once.

Well, my true goal wasn't to get permission from him anyway. As far as I was concerned, my goal was to make sure Father gave up on trying to set me up on a blind date with the crown prince. Even if he opposed our relationship, this would be enough for me as long as I stayed as far away from the crown prince as I could.

“We'll be upstairs then,” I said.

Father remained silent.

He must've been disappointed in me for what just happened. I sighed without realizing it. My current position meant that I should be grateful that I wasn't getting married off just yet. Inheriting any of Father's property would be a stretch. The only solution I had left was to become independent. Until then, I had to hang in there. With this thought in mind, I walked to my room with Max.

When I arrived, I saw Sella and Mary tidying up. “Where's Merilyn?” I asked them.

“Oh, she's in the laundry room.”

I guess I had no choice. I was a little worried since Merilyn was usually in charge of preparing the tea, but I kept calm. “Please bring us tea and cookies for two. And use my favorite tea set,” I added.

“Yes, my lady!” the two maids said in unison, determined. After they left the room, I closed the door behind them and turned around.

Now, to have a serious discussion about our contract—wait. What on earth? He was lying comfortably on my couch. Just lounging there.

I understood that we were in a contractual relationship, but we were still supposed to be a couple. Would it hurt for him to properly play the part? I sighed for a moment, then took out a few sheets of paper and two quill pens.

“Hey, come here,” I said. Heeding my call, he made his way to the tea table. “Sit down.” I gestured to the seat across from me, and he took it. “Regarding our contract, I was thinking of writing down some terms and conditions. If you want anything from me, write it down here.”

At my prompting, he picked up a quill pen and began scribbling some things down. I stopped in the middle of my own writing and watched him curiously.

He was left-handed... and his handwriting was atrocious.

As I watched in amazement, he frowned slightly. “It got smudged,” he muttered. The notational system commonly favored right-handed people. No matter how carefully he wrote, he was bound to run into some problems.

I took a handkerchief out from my pocket and handed it to him. “Here you go.”

Without a word, he grabbed it and started wiping the ink off his hand. Then, he scratched out the smudged part and started writing again. Curious, I peeked at what he had written. It stated the following:

During the duration of this contract, Jubelian will not meet with any other men.

I started this whole deal because I don’t want to meet any other men in the first place... Unable to help it, I chuckled.

“Instead of laughing at someone else’s terms, why don’t you write out yours?” he asked, irritated.

His accusations were true, but I decided not to admit to them to spare my pride. “I was interested, so I was just taking a look,” I said.

“What’s so interesting?”

Usually, mercenary guilds provided lessons on literacy and penmanship to avoid training pushovers who couldn’t read requests and contracts. “Your script is rather freewheeling. Did you learn how to read and write from the guild?” I

tactfully avoided directly insulting his terrible handwriting.

“I didn’t learn it in a guild. I learned from my mother,” he frowned. The moment I heard that, an overwhelming sense of embarrassment flooded me.

I made a mistake. He must have been offended by the snarky remark I made since this was something that he learned from his mother. I swallowed nervously and said, “Hey, about what I said just now—”

At that moment, the door opened. “We’re sorry for being late, my lady,” my maids announced.

I nodded at Mary and Sella to let them know it was okay. “It’s fine. Please set the table up for us.”

Soon the tea table was decorated with appetizing cookies. Ah, it looked delicious.

When I picked up the teapot and poured tea into the cups, the soft yet slightly bitter scent tickled my nose. Hm, I was concerned about how well the tea would turn out because Merilyn didn’t prepare it, but it seemed like they did a pretty good job...

I was about to give the maids a quick compliment but then I noticed the teacups they chose. They were pink and adorned with flowers, so I groaned.

But it should be fine, right? He wasn’t a nobleman, so he probably wouldn’t know what the cups meant, right?

With that thought in mind, I smiled at him.



When he saw the teacups, Max doubted his eyes. Did she ask for them cups despite knowing what they meant?

Expensive teacups were a source of pride to be had, but they were also a measure of how the host or hostess thought of their guests. Costly and valuable teacups containing lots of gold were utilized amongst precious guests, and

vibrant and feminine teacups were used amongst noblewomen. For male guests, tea was usually served in cups devoid of flowers or bright colors.

When negotiating over disputes at the border, Max had occasionally faced barbarian lords who expressed their hostility toward him with mockingly chosen teacups. Even so, they only used cups with crude monsters drawn on them to sarcastically and subtly remark on his brutal personality. They had never used colorful cups decorated with flowers like these.

To use cups like these... she was either trying to insult him, or she just didn't know what they meant. Did he seem weak to her by any chance? When he thought about it, it wasn't an unreasonable assumption since Jubelian had joked about protecting him before. Max inspected Jubelian suspiciously.

"Oh, these are my favorite teacups," she said innocently. It really was as if she didn't know anything. As he listened, Max studied the cups once again. Although he hated flowers, the gold rim of the cup looked luxurious and it had an adequate shape. The more he stared, the easier it was to tolerate. It wasn't so bad.

"It's decent," he commented, coaxing a smile from Jubelian. It reached her eyes, and the sight of it brought a small smirk to Max's lips as he took the teacup in hand.



"Come on, try it," I said. At my urging, Max lifted the teacup for a sip.

The sight of him doing so felt peculiar to me. His form was markedly elegant. That... that was a little weird. Tea was a luxury item that not everyone could easily access. In fact, they were so valuable that storage boxes withholding tea leaves were often locked. Therefore, as a simple mercenary, Max never should have had as many opportunities to enjoy drinks like these. It didn't make sense for him to drink it so naturally and with such poise.

I couldn't help but feel suspicious. What if... he was actually the young master of a noble family? What if he ran away from home? I was a little skeptical of his

true identity.

He put down the cup. "I don't know why people drink this," he said coldly. I almost clicked my tongue in annoyance. It was the finest we had, and in my opinion, it was relatively well-brewed. He was just grumbling about it for the sake of it.

Right. Well, there was no way a nobleman wouldn't understand the taste of tea.

At that moment, his voice interrupted my thoughts as he presented his writing to me. "Here, take a look."

While looking through his terms, I frowned. This guy... he really wrote down whatever he wanted, didn't he?

Written in his terrible handwriting, the terms were as follows:

- 1. Jubelian will always trust what Max says and follow his every word.**
- 2. When Jubelian goes out, she will disclose to Max where she intends to go. When attending a banquet or a meeting, she is obligated to report her attendance to Max.**
- 3. During the duration of this contract, Jubelian will not meet with any other men.**
- 4. For four days every week, Jubelian will spend at least eight hours a day with Max.**

I was astounded by his demands. They looked like something a grumpy, self-centered boss would write. Whenever I asked to know more about him, he was always telling me that none of it was any of my business. However, based on what he had written here, it seemed like he wanted to know everything about my private life. How unfair! I lamented for a moment, then opened my mouth to express my opinion. "Hey, do you happen to—"

"Add one more thing," he interrupted. "'Jubelian should call Max by his name.'"

I had only learned his name today so there was no way I would be familiar with it already. Even so, after looking back on it, I had been calling him by name

this entire time. I didn't expect to be criticized for a mistake I had only made once.

"Then will you—I mean... Then, Max, will you call me by my name from now on, as well?"

He paused. Then, he nodded gently. "Okay."

I observed him for a moment. Then, I started revising his terms. It was so terrible that I didn't know where to start. I scratched out some of his entries and wrote down my amendments on a clean sheet of paper.

1. The employer is obligated to comply with the employee's requests as much as possible.

2. The employer and employee are to respect each other's privacy.

3. In the case of either party's absence, the employer and employee are obligated to report their locations to each other.

4. During the period of this contract, the employer and employee are not allowed to pursue a romantic relationship with another person.

5. The employee will watch their words and actions in front of others.

6. Date locations shall be determined after further discussion and confirmed upon agreement, but, if possible, dates shall occur in places with a large number of people.

The above terms and conditions specify that the contract may be terminated by mutual consent and may be subject to change depending on the circumstances.

The contract will be completed once Jubelian feels safe from the crown prince.

Employer: Jubelian Eloy Floyen

Employee: Max

After finishing the revisions, I pushed the paper toward him. "Here. Read this and tell me if anything needs to be reconsidered."

He snatched the paper from me and squinted at it. "What is this?" he

demanded.

“It’s all the revisions I made to what you wrote. Read it over carefully and tell me if you don’t li—”

“I can’t accept this,” he said. Then, he promptly tore up the contract.

I took a deep breath. Did he just rip apart everything I wrote? If he didn’t like it, he could’ve just told me!

He definitely wasn’t a normal person. Yes, thinking it over, he had always been like this. Even after I had taken care of him for a few days, he left without notice. Without answering me. He was frequently and easily irritated.

I supported living freely, but I still knew how to respect others, at least. That was what having common courtesy meant. I had been considerate to him so he wouldn’t feel uncomfortable around me, but he had been lacking in regard for me from the very beginning, his callousness persisting even now.

We would have to see each other more often from now on... I had overlooked his rude behavior in the past because I had assumed we weren’t going to see each other very much, but since we were now in a contractual relationship, that wouldn’t be the case anymore.

If we were hitting rough patches before we had ever even started, then the next step I had to take was an obvious one.



“If you’re that against it, then I guess it can’t be helped,” Jubelian said. “Let’s end our contract here.”

Max couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “What do you mean? I thought you were trying to avoid becoming engaged to the crown prince.”

Jubelian leveled him with a frigid stare. “There’s nothing we can do. If we can’t work anything out at the start... it’ll just be exhausting to keep going.”

The desperation Max saw in her a few moments ago was now nowhere to be found. She had a distant look on her face, making it clear she had let go of everything. Max’s throat suddenly felt dry, like it was burning from the inside

out. "Don't be hasty," he managed to say.

"What do you mean?" Jubelian sighed quietly. "You tore up the contract, which means you have no intention of compromising."

"No, I..."

Max's lips twitched. Throughout his time as the crown prince, he had torn apart every document that had displeased him in any way. Whenever he did so, his aides knew to write up a new one that was more to his liking. No one had ever pointed out that tearing up the papers was wrong; all they did was apologize for their inadequate writing.

Because of this, Max couldn't understand Jubelian. Couldn't she just compose another one and bring it to him? His thoughts swam in confusion.

"Do you feel good when someone ignores your opinion?" Jubelian asked suddenly. He didn't respond, and she sighed at his silence. "It's the same for other people," she continued. "When someone ignores my opinion, it hurts my pride and makes me feel unpleasant."

Was it because the environment around them was a quiet one? He could hear her voice exceptionally well.

Was that so? His aides and subordinates worked for him as if it was the most natural thing to do, and in turn, Max used them. It was the way things had always been since he was of a higher status.

"So, are you saying that you're offended?" he asked dully.

Jubelian nodded sedately. "Yes. In all honesty, it didn't feel good."

She was the one in need of his help, but she still looked confident. For a reason unbeknownst to him, Max decided to keep his mouth shut.

"Since you didn't like what I had written, I thought it would be best to call it quits before things got worse. Besides, I'm the one asking you for the favor in the first place."

Her words were making him sulk. He knew that if he stayed stubborn here, he might never see her again.

Who would be afraid of something like that, though? It didn't matter to...

It... it didn't m...

Before he could finish that thought, his mouth betrayed him.

"I was at fault," he admitted, apologizing.



It felt weird to witness him apologize so meekly. Just a while ago, he was the same guy who refused to apologize to Father.

"Good. As long as you know," I said.

Surprisingly, the negotiations went easily afterwards because most of his frustrations were because of trivial issues. I couldn't believe he acted like that just because I didn't include that thing he mentioned about calling him by his name...

I held back a sigh and showed him the newly recreated and revised contract. "Here. Is this what you wanted?"

"Yes," he said. With his confirmation, I wrote up another copy and handed it to him.

"Sign here," I instructed. He paused and swallowed nervously.

Did he not have a signature? His reluctance made me wonder, but soon enough, he picked up his quill, signing rather awkwardly. I let go of my ridiculous speculation. It seemed like he made one not too long ago. Maybe his awkwardness was because he didn't have a lot of circumstances where he had to sign for anything before.

His voice disrupted my contemplation. "By the way, will you be... attending any banquets soon?"

"Ah, I plan to attend a tea party in the near future."

He studied me for a while before nodding with a sigh. "I see. Do you know who will be attending the party?"

"Just some noblewomen who are acquaintances of an acquaintance I know."

He had a serious look on his face. “Will it really only be noblewomen who are attending?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ve already told you. Why do you keep—oh!” Suddenly, a great idea crossed my mind. This was good. I could make sure everyone saw him with me sooner.

In the past, I troubled myself with rumors because I feared what Father thought of me, but now that he was trying to marry me off to the crazy crown prince, I no longer cared about whether or not I left a good impression on him. Having a bad public image would actually work more in my favor if I wanted to disqualify myself as a candidate for the crown prince’s bride.

“Max, could you take me there that day?”

He paused. “Why?”

“Ah, I just want to introduce you to others as my boyfriend. Is that okay?” I smiled at him. His eyebrows furrowed slightly and he wore a strange expression on his face. It looked like the idea didn’t please him very much, so I rushed to reassure him. “Of course, you can refuse if you don’t want to,” I said.

He nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll come get you when it’s over.” I was about to nod in return but then I stopped. I didn’t know if he had any nice clothes.

Honestly, it would be enough for me to confirm the false rumors claiming I had started dating an unidentified man, so it shouldn’t really matter what he wore. However, there was a saying that went, ‘what looks good, tastes good,’ so I wanted to dress him up and show him off.

Since he was helping me... the least I could do was buy some clothes for him. I would buy him all the clothes he wanted. “Let’s go shopping tomorrow,” I said, making my decision.

His face scrunched up a bit at my words, but I smiled at him. Since I was going through the trouble of dressing him up, I should do a good job of it so everyone could discover how handsome he was.



“Hey, Max. Could you turn around?”

Max let out a sigh. Having already tried on dozens of outfits, he was beginning to feel like a children’s doll.

The owner of the clothes shop fawned over him, beaming all the while. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen someone who suited the clothes so well,” she gushed. She probably meant to compliment him, but to Max, it just sounded like irritating nonsense.

How much longer did I have to put up with this? His face had twisted in annoyance until he looked over at Jubelian.

She was smiling, satisfied. “You’re right,” she agreed. “I’ve heard before that a good face makes for good fashion, but now I know precisely what that means.”

Although her words were clearly a product of her judging him, he found that they didn’t anger him. Instead, he felt an odd tickle in his heart and the corners of his mouth trended upwards. However, what she said next had his burgeoning smile flopping right back into a frown.

“Oh, do you have anything a little more colorful than this?” she asked.

Max’s closet was full of neutral colors. His casual clothes, dress suits, and even the armor he wore on the battlefield were all black, clearly conveying his stylistic preferences. He wasn’t looking forward to more colorful things.

Well, it was too early to jump to conclusions. Maybe the clothes wouldn’t look too bad. He decided to wait and see before making any judgments first.

However, after seeing what the seamstress presented to him, Max freaked out. What was that hideous thing?!

Before him was a red justacorps embroidered in gold. The outfit was even noticeable from a distance. It was far from his tastes. “I don’t like this...” he murmured, trying to refuse it, but he stopped when he saw Jubelian watching him with expectant, glistening eyes.

“Would you like to try it on?”

Even though it was only a suggestion, Max couldn’t bring himself to say no.

After he put the clothes back on, the seamstress started to fawn over him again.

“Wow, it really suits you.”

Max frowned as he inspected himself in the mirror. Was this okay? After his mother’s death, Max had abandoned colorful styles. Maybe that was why his appearance seemed strange to him.

“What do you think? Do you like it?” Jubelian asked. Caught up in the confusion of the moment, he nodded. She smiled brightly. “That’s a relief. I was worried since it seemed to be more to my taste than yours.”

Max felt strange when he heard her say the word *taste*. He glanced at himself in the mirror again and found that he looked better than he had initially thought.

“Max,” Jubelian calmly called. Independent of his notice, she had approached him, and now she was gazing at him with her jewel-like eyes. Max could feel his heart pounding under her stare. “Let’s go.”

Max gently accepted the fine hand she held out for him to take. Once he did, she lowered her voice to a soft whisper. “The clothes are a gift from me,” she said.

Normally, he wouldn’t have accepted such a thing, gift or not. However, he remembered her words from before. “*That’s a relief,*” she had said. “*I was worried since it seemed to be more to my taste than yours.*”

He decided to exercise some magnanimity and accept her gift.



I was worn out. Since I was visiting the various shops on Arcade Street with Max, I could feel multiple stares directed toward us. I turned to the main focus of all the attention.

He was handsome enough cloaked in a dark cape, but now that he was dressed up, he was really something else. Fine clothes were said to make the

man, but in this case, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it was the other way around. Those clothes benefited from being worn by him. How could a face like this not be mentioned in the original novel? My expression hardened as I blamed the author for choosing to set up the characters so strangely.

"Oh, who's this? If it isn't Lady Floyen!" a voice called out.

"Ah, long time no see, esteemed son of Viscount Droil," I replied.

Grinning, he slyly approached, greeting me with a bow. "My noble lady is beautiful today, as always."

"Thank you."

We were exchanging casual greetings when he suddenly said, "But the person next to you... is someone I've never seen before."

Since he attended many parties, it was obvious that he would know most of the public figures who lived in the capital. It wasn't unreasonable for him to be curious about someone he didn't recognize.

Well, I guess it didn't matter anymore if rumors would spread. My goal was to avoid the crown prince. Meeting a talkative person like Radian was a pretty lucky move, all things considering.

"This is my boyfriend, Max," I said.

A strange glow manifested within Radian's eyes. "Oh, if you don't mind, could you tell me which family he's from?"

I readied a vague answer, but Max spoke up before I had the chance to give it. "That's none of your business," he spat.

I sighed at his harsh tone of voice. *Ah...* this guy was going to cause me some trouble, after all.



The greedy gaze looking Jubelian up and down was not an unfamiliar one to Max. As someone who grew up in the palace and roamed the battlefield, he

recognized the look of greed and the desire to conquer. He became inexplicably angry as soon as he realized what he was seeing.

How dare someone like this man look upon Jubelian in such a way. He didn't know why, but he wanted to twist the insolent fool's neck. Nevertheless, he held himself back because something in Jubelian's eyes seemed to urge him to be patient. Meeting her gaze strangely calmed the overwhelming feelings within him, suffusing him with the same sense of peace he felt when he first fell asleep in her room. Max clenched his fists and suppressed his murderous intentions.

Why on earth was he holding himself back? While he questioned himself about his unexplainable actions, Jubelian was speaking.

"Ah, my boyfriend is from the countryside far away from here, so he's not well versed on our manners," she said. "I hope you understand."

Max narrowed his eyes at her calm voice. He learned all manners he needed to back when he was nine years old. For the royal family, etiquette and manners were only a means of determining if one person was treating another person improperly. By the way Radian seemed to act, Max could tell that he was being rude.

How dare the son of a mere viscount talk to the daughter of a duke in such a way. Max gripped his fists even harder, the blue veins on the back of his hand becoming more and more prominent. He sent Radian a warning glare, but the snake-eyed man didn't look the least bit intimidated.

"I see. Now that the lady has a new lover, a lot of gentlemen in the capital will be heartbroken." The conniving man winked and laughed. "Should I mention that I, of course, will also be one of them?" Max could tell Radian was looking down on him by the way he eyed him, smiling crookedly.

How amusing. When Max had participated in the war at the age of sixteen, there had been many times where he had been ignored for being a rookie. However, that stopped being the case after he decapitated an enemy commander and displayed the head in the square for all to see. From the start, he was the kind of person who never avoided a fight.

Would the son of Viscount Droil still be able to look at Max the same way

after his tongue was cut off? His mind began to fill itself with brutal thoughts, but when Jubelian suddenly locked arms with him, his anger started to fade. What was she doing? As if to answer Max's question, Jubelian parted her red lips to speak.

"We'll be going, then," she said. "We're running out of time for our date."

Max's expression relaxed at her words. A date...? Although he had unwillingly taken part in her dress-up game, her words confirmed for him who she was spending time with. When he realized this, an unfamiliar warmth began bubbling within his chest, tickling him.

"I hope you'll allow me some time as well the next we meet," Radian said. Max smirked at how he kept his act up until the end.

The Son of Viscount Droil, huh? As he watched Radian walk away, Max vowed to place Viscount Droil's family on his hit list for when the day of the rebellion came around. The first thing he would do was rip off the mouth that dared to laugh at him.

Max's eyes were shining with bloodthirst.

Suddenly, Jubelian asked him a question. "Do you want to get something sweet to eat?"

Clearing the savagery from his eyes, Max glanced over at her inquiringly.

"I'm just stressed out from having to see that irritating guy," she explained.

He wasn't sure what she meant by *stressed out*, but he did understand that she was speaking ill of Radian. "Then, we can get rid of him, right? As the daughter of a duke, it will be a simple feat to exterminate a viscount's family."

At his words, Jubelian let out a sigh, her face turning serious. "I really hate him, but I don't want to get rid of him."

"Why?"

Jubelian sighed once more at Max's obliviousness. "It's like... I hate rats, but I don't want to go through the trouble of killing them just to see their dead bodies," she explained. "Do you know what I mean?"

Max learned something important just then. So, she didn't like killing... for

some reason, that thought depressed him. Was this why she was afraid of the crown prince?

Her lively voice brought him back to reality. "Let's stop talking about unpleasant things and get some sweets. I know a good place," she said.

Max stared at her in return. He hated sweet things.

Mistaking his silence for affirmation, she began pulling on his arm. "I'm sure you'll like it," she enthused.

If he wanted to, he could have refused, but he didn't. Instead, Max allowed himself to be helplessly dragged along.

Soon, they arrived at an indescribably glamorous tearoom. Jubelian looked over at Max, expecting some sort of reaction, but he seemed largely apathetic. It was rather average, he thought. No matter how colorfully the interior was decorated, it was mediocre in the eyes of someone who grew up in a palace lined with gold.

"Hello, my lady," greeted a clerk carrying a menu. "What would you like to order?"

Jubelian glanced at Max. "What do you like? I like strawberry cake."

To be honest, he hated sweets, but he felt that if he told her the truth then her smile would disappear. "I want the same thing," he said instead.

"I think you and I have similar tastes."

Max furrowed his brows at her words. Their tastes were completely different. Cucumbers, showy clothes, and sweets were all things he hated. He had been molding himself to fit her interests of his own accord, but she hadn't noticed at all. It was amazing how dense she was.

He sighed in frustration.



Mikhail's expression twisted into one of irritation when he laid his eyes on the

face of someone whom he didn't want to see. "What brings you here again?" he asked.

Radian lifted a glass at his question. "Let's sit down first. Then, we'll talk."

He was extremely displeased to see that Radian used the excuse of being his cousin to drink his expensive alcohol. Instead of sitting down, Mikhail lifted a glass of liquor up off the table.

He didn't want to talk to Radian face to face, did he? Radian smirked at his cousin's obvious behavior. "Did you know?" he prompted.

"What?" Whatever his vile cousin had to say, Mikhail was determined to not be shaken up this time. With this pledge in mind, he began to bring his glass to his mouth.

"Lady Floyen. I saw her with a man today."

As soon as he heard that absurd claim, the glass slipped from Mikhail's hand.

Clang!

There was a loud crash followed by pieces of glass skittering across the floor. Radian opened his mouth to say something but closed it when he noticed the look in his cousin's eyes.

Mikhail's bleak voice cut through the ensuing silence. "I dare you to say something like that again."



Mikhail paused while wiping at his dripping face with a towel, deep in thought.

"I definitely saw it," Radian had said. "She was with some handsome guy."

God... there was no way that woman would do something like that.

Suddenly, he heard a knock on the door.

"Young master, you're scheduled to attend the Terence family's tea party

today—”

“I’m aware,” he interrupted. “I’ll be ready on time, so you can leave.”

Mikhail gritted his teeth after sending his servant away. A new lover? That didn’t make sense. Radian had to be talking nonsense like he did last time.

Thinking back on the time Radian spread those false rumors about the cufflinks, Mikhail observed himself in the mirror. His face had become thinner, but he was still attractive. If she saw him today, he was certain she would... would...

Mikhail clenched his fists, unable to finish the thought.



On the morning of the tea tasting party, I spun around in front of a mirror. I was wearing the new dress I ordered from a boutique. Maybe it was because I had the cumbersome frill sleeves replaced with some short puff sleeves, but it was easier to move my arms around. I also had the top of the dress’ stomacher changed to expose less of my upper body since I had always been concerned about that.

Hm. This was okay, right?

The fashion trends in the novel significantly changed after Princess Beatrice showed up to her coming-of-age ceremony in a dress that had a pannier that was much larger than usual. Unlike the splendor that the princess sought, the dress I was currently wearing was completely different. The whalebone pannier was replaced with a petticoat made of several layers of cloth and the long sleeves were replaced with short puff sleeves. These were only slight improvements to the uncomfortable Rococo style clothing, but I quite liked them.

If I could, I would like to wear something more comfortable, but I would become an eyesore if I stuck out too much... wearing whatever I wanted was reserved for after I became independent.

Then, I heard Marilyn's voice. "My lady, there's a guest waiting," she reported. Knowing that she was talking about Max, I nodded at her.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be right down." I glanced at the clock. He was an hour earlier than expected... I admired his diligence.

Marilyn spoke up again. "And this is your allowance from the master."

I took a deep breath, pleasantly surprised by Father's unexpected present. That was a relief. I was worried about losing my allowance. But... in a situation like the one I created, it probably wasn't enough of a punishment for Father to withhold my allowance and kick me out. Honestly, I didn't understand why he was acting this way.

I decided to think about this later. I had other things to do today. Pushing my concerns away, I sighed and left the room.

That man, Max. He didn't dress weirdly, did he? With that question in mind, I went downstairs, and the sight that greeted me at the foot of the steps impressed me.

His black hair was usually messy, but it looked neat today as if he took more care into styling it. On top of that, he was wearing the clothes I bought for him along with some matching accessories. Everything fit perfectly.

He was a stunning person, but now that he was all dressed up... he was no joke. He was handsome enough to capture anyone's eye.

As I gawked at him, I realized something strange. Why was he staring at me like that? The thought popped into my head after I noticed his piercing gaze. Did he think I looked weird?

"Let's go," he suddenly said, his voice as cold as ice. He turned around without waiting for a response from me.

Well, I didn't expect anything much in the first place.



Although her dress was simpler than usual, it greatly accentuated her pure and innocent aura. Like the servants in the mansion catching sight of her, Max couldn't tear his eyes off of her.

She looked different today. Whenever Max glanced at her, his face would heat up and his heart would begin pounding uncontrollably. Afraid that she might notice, he kept his gaze fixed resolutely out the window after boarding the carriage.

Soon after, he heard Jubelian's breathing even out. He frowned, glancing sideways to peek at her.

Was she... asleep? He noticed this before, but she was the very definition of defenseless. She didn't do this in front of anyone else, did she? After a while, a sliver of a smile threatened his lips. She was a sight to behold.

Seeing Jubelian nodding off as she slept was somehow really funny despite how precarious it was. It would be worth seeing if she ended up falling forwards or not.

At that moment, a big jolt rattled through the carriage, causing her to jerk in place. Max's eyes widened in surprise. Before he could even really think about it, his body had moved for him, rushing to support her head with his hands so she wouldn't tumble down.

Why was he doing this? His face scrunched up as he mulled over his actions. Then, he laid her head on his shoulder, trying to rationalize his behavior all the while. Well, it was pretty annoying having to watch her nod off like that. Unlike before when her head was dangerously swaying back and forth, she looked more stable leaning against him, resting peacefully with her eyes still closed. Max recalled Fresia's report as he felt Jubelian's warmth seep into him.

"I heard that Lady Terence invited Sir Mikhail on her own accord. She didn't notify the other ladies about this."

Mikhail. For seemingly no reason, an unpleasant feeling would begin to rise within him whenever that name came to mind. Until the misunderstandings were cleared, he couldn't let that bugger bother Jubelian. Max scowled.

She began to wake. "Mm, huh...?" she murmured, puzzled. Looking up at him,

her bewildered gaze met his, and an inexplicable rush of heat began to creep up the back of his neck. She looked so defenseless...

“Keep sleeping,” he said, turning back to look out the window. It was better for him when he couldn’t see her face.

“Alright, thank you,” she replied pleasantly.

At that, a faint smile made its way onto Max’s face.



Lady Terence’s drawing room, where the tea tasting party was scheduled to take place, had a chilly atmosphere.

“It seems like we have an uninvited guest,” Rose began. “I would like to know what’s going on, Veronica.”

“I was only following one of our meeting rules,” Veronica sarcastically replied. “Whoever provides the party’s venue is free to invite whomever they please.”

Rose raised her voice. “The other day, I clearly mentioned that one needed to obtain a unanimous agreement before issuing such a decision. I’d like to ask you why you did this without our combined permission.”

Instead of Veronica, another voice quietly interjected. “If that’s the case, I was told that you, Lady Rose, had also broken the rules. Strictly enforcing regulations upon others while making yourself the sole exception to them doesn’t look very good, does it?”

With a hint of spite radiating from her purple eyes, Rose glared at Mikhail. She had no idea why he came here, but she knew it wasn’t for a good reason. Before Rose could properly refute him, however, another voice chimed in.

“Sir Mikhail certainly has a point,” one of the other ladies said.

“It doesn’t make much of a difference, does it? Now we just have two additional exceptional guests,” another agreed. The ladies’ eyes were focused on Mikhail’s handsome face. Realizing what they were thinking, Rose’s face

twisted in annoyance.

What? They ended up falling for his looks! Those traitors! She quivered with anger she couldn't conceal.

Just then, the door to the drawing room opened. The arguments suddenly came to a stop, every member of the tea party startled by a certain someone's arrival.

"Oh, I'm here on time, but... all of you came early, it seems," Jubelian noted.

Rose couldn't bring herself to say hello. Jubelian was dressed in a white dress that had puff sleeves instead of long sleeves, which were the norm. She looked pure and thin like a small, fragile white bird.

What really made her shine, however, was the man entering next to her. He had chilling crimson eyes and his ink-black hair contrasted perfectly with her alabaster skin. Overall, he had a handsome appearance, but his fierce, sharp aura made it difficult to approach him. One could say that they gave each other a complementary effect. Having a man beside her who differed with her so strongly only served to emphasize the purity of her pale, fragile aura.

Rose, recalling a romance novel she had read in the past, thought Jubelian looked like a princess while her partner looked like the evil, handsome king who kidnapped her.

Noticing she had been blankly staring at them, Rose came to her senses. "Excuse my manners, Lady Floyen, but who might the person next to you be...?" she carefully asked.

Jubelian smiled. "Oh, this is my boyfriend, Max."

The ladies at the tea party were instantly surprised. They began whispering amongst themselves. "Wait a minute, did she say boyfriend?" one asked.

"I thought the rumors about you having a lover were false..." another trailed off.

Suddenly, everyone's gaze shifted to Mikhail. His beautiful face, once relaxed, was now pinched in a look of irritation. Was the crap that Radian had discussed with him actually true? A bitter smile tainted his lips as he clenched his fists

tightly. No, this was probably a trick to make him jealous.

He studied the man next to Jubelian. Max had a decent face, but judging from how she introduced him using only his first name, he either had to be from a lowly family or... he was a commoner.

Mikhail wanted to take that unpleasant man away from her and trample on him. However, as an aristocrat, he had no reason to deal with someone of lowly birth. She was just trying to provoke him with some guy from a family of nobodies... but that wasn't going to work. He scowled, coming to a decision.

He was going to run her patience ragged today.



With all the attention he attracted, I knew Max was a handsome guy. I, on the other hand, was lucky enough not to look too incomparable. I was wearing such simple clothing, after all.

Well, it couldn't be helped. I chose convenience over beauty and offered him the contract. I resigned myself to my fate.

Suddenly, a member of the tea party addressed me. "Um, Lady Floyen, about your dress..."

Ugh, was she going to point out how shabby it was? Since my attire was neither trendy nor fancy, I was afraid she might've perceived it as having lowered the tea party's class.

"You look so elegant and pretty in it!" She finished with a blush.

The lady next to her nodded in agreement. "If you don't mind, could you tell me which dress shop you ordered it from?"

Huh?

At first, I was embarrassed by their unexpected praise, but then the truth of their intentions suddenly occurred to me. Oh, were they afraid of embarrassing me for wearing such inadequate clothing?

Feeling a bit grateful toward them, I replied gladly. “It’s from Lily Muge’s dress shop.”

“Oh my goodness, thank you!”

I was relieved by their hospitality. Then, I noticed a familiar face.

Wait, how was that person here? Seeing this person here of all places made me flustered.

“I just don’t think these dresses will suit you very well because of your slender figure, Lady Floyen. If fashion trends weren’t so important, you wouldn’t have to wear such uncomfortable, unflattering dresses. You could actually wear something that looked good on you. It’s simply... a shame,” she had said.

The lady I met back at the dress shop...! She was here! I couldn’t believe it. What a wonderful coincidence!

Maybe it was because I felt a bit closer to her now, but I was somehow glad to see her. I nodded at her, but she tilted her head away from me as if she hadn’t seen me, moving to whisper to the person sitting next to her. Reflexively, I looked over to check who it was and almost narrowed my eyes at the sight.

Why was Mikhail here?

If someone were to ask me to describe how I felt after diligently dressing myself up only to encounter my ex-boyfriend at a meeting with my friends, I would simply say, “Hm. I don’t really feel anything.”

Was it because I didn’t leave with any regrets? Honestly, I was caught a bit off-guard since no one had informed me that he would be here, but that was about it. I felt fine even after looking directly at his face.

He could be uncomfortable around me, though. Turning my attention elsewhere, I figured that I should stay quiet so we don’t bump into each other.

Contrary to my expectations, however, Mikhail greeted me with a gentle voice. “Long time no see, Jubelian,” he said. Maybe it was because it had been a while now since we had broken up. Maybe it was because freeing himself from me had made him joyous. Either way, Mikhail had a relaxed expression on his face. He looked a bit thinner than before, though.

Hm, was it okay for him to see me like this now? I wondered for a brief second before quickly denying this speculation. He was probably behaving as he was because of how others might perceive him. He had a very good image just like a novel's male lead should. He was gentle, kind, and well-mannered. That was probably why he couldn't draw a strict line between us.

I would just have to draw it for him, then. Since my image had already been ruined by my past and Father was already upset with me, I didn't care if the public's opinion about me got worse at this point. To be honest, I didn't really feel like being nice to him.

"Yes, it's been a while," I replied indifferently. My voice came out so emotionlessly robotic that I couldn't believe I had spoken. I didn't want to look at him any longer, so I turned to Max, who was sitting right next to me.

He didn't look very happy. I studied his expression. He seemed displeased with something, and I decided that he must've been uncomfortable with the situation at hand.

"I'll see you in a little while," I said to Max, implying that he should go back to the carriage and get some rest. He gazed at me vacantly in return, however, and when he opened his mouth to speak, I became anxious, worried that he was going to start complaining to me in front of all the others.

"Have a good time... my lady," he replied with low, pleasant tones.

My eyes widened. Although I could tell he almost spoke informally out of habit, he had nevertheless gifted me an unexpected courtesy, managing to rein himself in. I couldn't hold back my laughter, tickled by his praiseworthy behavior.

"Oh yes, thank you," I said as he began to leave.

"Um, wait a minute!" a voice suddenly called out. Everyone's attention turned to Rose and she blushed in embarrassment after having stopped Max from leaving. "I'd like to make a suggestion," she continued. "Since we already have another unexpected guest with us today, I think it should be fine to add one more..." She trailed off.

I was surprised at Rose's sudden suggestion. Oh, I didn't think that was really

okay... even though he had done a great job just now, I honestly couldn't trust him with much more. He was like a ticking time bomb and I had no way of knowing when he was going to explode. Moreover, small gatherings like this tended to avoid collecting uninvited guests. I could tell that the idea wasn't going to be a welcome one, and I had no need to earn others' criticism at the moment.

I decided to reject Rose's proposal. "Oh, thank you for your consideration, but —"

"Yes, I agree," one lady interrupted.

"I agree as well," another spoke up.

The unexpected flow of events had me scrunching my nose in confusion. Was it okay even though he was an outsider? I was amazed. I wasn't expecting the aristocratic people gathered here to be so inclusive and tolerant!

Well, if they were nice enough to say that the dress that Max had frowned at after seeing was pretty... it wouldn't be much of a stretch.

I was trying to come up with a way to avoid this sudden turn of events when someone spoke up and saved me. "I disagree," Mikhail said. It was ironic that he was the one to stubbornly refuse like this. "Don't you already have an exception on your side?"

He stared at me coldly. It was true that I was technically an exception, too, but it was absurd for him to make such an accusation. Nevertheless, instead of retorting, I stayed quiet, welcoming his opinion.

"Isn't that different, though? In Lady Floyen's case, I had received everyone's consent in advance," Rose objected. Even though I appreciated her willingness to take my side, I was frustrated since I wanted Max gone.

Oh, what should I do? I sighed. Three people have already said it was okay for Max to stay. Mikhail seemed to be the only person in opposition. At this rate, I would have to watch over Max throughout the entirety of the tea party.

Then, someone who had been silent from the beginning opened her mouth. "I disagree as well," the noblewoman I met at the dress shop said. I didn't know her name. "Displays of favoritism would just oppose fairness and put Lady

Floyen in an awkward position. Please refrain from acting in such a way, Rose.”

Although this lady’s motivation behind opposing Rose was unknown to me, things turned out well again thanks to her.

I honestly believed we could have similar personalities. Her impression on me was growing rather favorable. “It’s as the two of them said. I’m simply thrilled to have been invited to this place,” I said.

At my euphemistic refusal, Rose glanced at me with disappointment in her eyes. “But...” she began, trailing off.

Worried that I might’ve hurt her feelings, I decided to express my gratitude with greater emphasis. “Thank you for treating my boyfriend so considerately. Since he used to live in the countryside, however, he isn’t used to attending meetings like this,” I explained.

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes. For that reason, I think it would be best if he left to rest in our carriage, isn’t that right?” I glanced at Max, but he was glaring at me with dissatisfaction. Did something set him off again? What was wrong with him? I was doing my best to hint my intentions at him despite how much of a rebellious child he was acting.

The lady whose name I didn’t know spoke up once more. “Well, since he’s Lady Floyen’s partner and I have plenty of empty rooms... I’ll lend him a place to stay while he waits,” she said.

Upon her display of kindness, I was finally able to figure out who she was.

“Thank you, Lady Terence,” I replied.

Her face looked blank. “Don’t mention it.”

Her cool personality only made me like her even more.



Recalling what had happened, Veronica pulled a face. What was the big deal

about some decent-looking guy? Everyone kept hinting at her because of him. What for? She didn't want to lend the man a room when his status was so unclear, but there was no helping it. She was afraid Lady Floyen would get angry if she didn't at least do that much.

He was just some petty commoner. How stupid.

However, upon recalling Max's visage, her cheeks grew hot. She hurriedly turned back to Mikhail. Even though he looked a little fatigued, that minor flaw only served to highlight his beautiful features. Just as she had expected, Max wasn't as good-looking as Sir Mikhail. However...

Veronica's eyes narrowed when she saw who Mikhail was staring at. She knew it. Lady Floyen was making Sir Mikhail uncomfortable.

At that moment, she heard a gentle voice free her from her thoughts. "Lady Veronica, the tea smells wonderful," Mikhail said, smiling at her.

She blushed. "Oh, I'm glad you like it."

Mikhail, still smiling at Veronica, peeked at Jubelian for a reaction. She had to have been envying Veronica by now, right?

Sure enough, he caught Jubelian sighing as she looked at them. Mikhail smirked at the sight. He knew it. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't escape from his grasp.



I unconsciously sighed after witnessing Lady Terence blush. Out of everyone, why did she have to end up liking Mikhail? I wanted to stop her from falling prey to his evil influence. Since he was destined to love the princess, he wasn't being the slightest bit genuine toward her at the moment. In the end, the only thing that would await Lady Terence was destruction.

Yes, just like what happened to Jubelian in the original novel. As I sympathized with the woman who seemed to be following in my past self's footsteps, I took a sip of tea and almost frowned.

Um... this tea probably hadn't been brewed correctly... Judging from its scent and color, I could tell it was white tea, but it had grown slightly bitter through the overuse of hot water.

I thought about saying something but decided to keep my mouth shut in the end. I would only hurt her feelings if I tried anything. Just as I had done in the past, I knew she wouldn't listen to others. The only thing left for me to do now was to pray for her.

"Please do not walk on the path to becoming a villainess," I silently pleaded, wishing for a safe breakup between her and Mikhail as I drank the bitter tea.



"You can wait here," the servant said. Max had been led to another drawing room in the count's house.

To ask a member of the royal family to stay in such a shabby place... Max silently complained to himself. Then, he stopped after realizing the room was filled with luxurious furniture and interior accessories.

However, when he recalled Mikhail, who had annoyed him from the start, he became furious.

"Long time no see, Jubelian," Mikhail had said.

Contrary to the rumors that claimed Mikhail considered Jubelian a bothersome pest, his eyes were filled with an immense obsession as he beheld her, turning cold when it reached Max. It was as if he was warning Max to stay away from what was his.

Max seethed. How dare Mikhail look at him like that. Recalling what Fresia had told him, he grew even more furious.

"I heard that Lady Floyen really liked Sir Mikhail," Fresia had mused. *"People say that she chased him around without caring about her reputation... in some ways, it's fortunate that they separated."*

Max started pacing back and forth in the room as irritation and restlessness

suddenly began to mount within him. At that moment, a window fell into his line of sight. It looked large enough for a person to enter and exit out of.

“Don’t cause any trouble and wait there quietly, okay?” Jubelian had whispered to him, but he ignored her command. He opened the window.

He couldn’t just sit here and do nothing.



“Lady Veronica, would you like to go out with me sometime?” Mikhail asked.

“Oh my, yes! I would love to!” Veronica happily exclaimed. “When should we?”

“Let’s decide after checking when we both have time.”

Mikhail, still conversing with Veronica, glanced over toward Jubelian. Now then, it was about time for her to react...

But, strangely enough, Jubelian was no longer looking at him. She was just quietly drinking her tea.

“Veronica, you have something here,” he added.

“Ah, yes. Th-thank you...” Veronica flushed as Mikhail smiled at her. Then, he turned to Jubelian again and squinted slightly.

That was strange. Although he had done more than enough to entice Jubelian into causing a great fuss, she didn’t react in any way. Why? Why wasn’t she looking at him? Mikhail felt anger bubble violently inside of him at her apathy. She lavished her attention onto mere commoners like that man from earlier, but wasn’t...

Mikhail started resenting her.

“Ah, I would like to suggest one more thing,” Rose said. Then, she blushed from the attention she got as the members of the tea party looked toward her in unison. “It’s nothing much, but I wanted to invite Lady Floyen to be a permanent new member of our tea tasting parties. I’d like to ask for everyone’s

opinions on this. What does everyone think?"

As soon as she finished speaking, the other two ladies spoke up excitedly.

"Oh my goodness, I would love to have her!" one said.

"Me too!" the other exclaimed.

Since Jubelian had told them which dress shop she had ordered her white dress from, they had started viewing her in a much more positive light. After hearing their responses, Jubelian's expression changed slightly despite having remained still up until then.

"Oh, I..." she began, uncertain as to how to respond.

Mikhail, who had seen this expression several times before, could tell precisely what she was thinking. Although it was a face that conveyed shy embarrassment, it was filled with joy. It was a face that Mikhail had so badly wanted to see again.

How come she made it for women like them... but not for him? Overwhelmed by devastation, Mikhail blankly gasped at her.

"I disagree," Veronica said. The faint smile on Jubelian's face began to disappear. Mikhail, having witnessed the change, felt his heart ache. That always happened when he was cold to her as well.

Upon realizing this, Mikhail felt upset at Veronica for voting against her. This good-for-nothing woman...

However, Veronica continued talking, ignorant of his reproachful gaze. "I'm not against it without reason," she said. "We have requirements that must first be met before someone could join!"

Convinced, the members nodded their heads.

"Well, that's an undeniable fact."

"You're right. We decided on that when we first formed the group."

Rose let out a sigh. "Lady Floyen, there are some conditions you must satisfy before you can join," she acquiesced.

At that, Jubelian replied as if nothing was wrong. "Oh, yes," she agreed. "It

can't be helped if I don't qualify. You don't have to worry."

Her calm words had Mikhail enduring a sense of déjà vu. *"Oh, I guess it can't be helped if you have to train. You don't have to worry about it,"* she had once said.

Fueled by this memory, Mikhail thoughtlessly opened his mouth. "I think it's better if you listen to the requirements first before making a decision."

Jubelian's gaze trembled faintly after hearing him speak. Witnessing her expression, Mikhail smiled, satisfied.



Feeling extremely flustered, I glared at Mikhail. Why was this guy interfering in other people's business? Of course, I was excited when I was invited to join the group since it was the first time girls my age showed me any goodwill in this life, but I couldn't completely enjoy their kindness due to my current circumstances. As I was right now, it wouldn't have been odd if I ended up getting thrown out of the group at any moment.

Having decided to reject the offer, I waited for Rose to speak up when something caught my eye. I inhaled sharply.

When did he get out?

I had asked Max to quietly wait for me, but now he was staring out at me from atop a tree. I felt suffocated by the sight. If the people around me noticed him as well... that would be the end of my life.

Max was currently posing as my lover. If others discovered that he was climbing trees to eavesdrop on a tea party, Father would surely have something to say about it. "Are you going to continue dating that ill-mannered guy?" he would surely tell me. "It would be better for you to marry the crown prince."

Thinking about how my life might end, I took a deep breath.

"Lady Floyen, did you hear what I had said just now?" Rose asked

I nodded thoughtlessly at her question. "Of course."

"Oh, so you're alright with the requirements?"

"Ah, yes."

Rose and the other noblewomen smiled brightly at my answer.

"Wow, I'll be looking forward to it."

"Likewise. I wonder what kind of special tea you'll prepare..."

Huh? What tea? I was dumbfounded when I registered what they said.

Rose, who was sitting next to me, smiled sweetly. "I'll be looking forward to it," she whispered.

"Huh? Looking forward to what?" I asked without a second thought.

"The tea party with your special tea," she answered with a laugh. She must've thought I was joking. I sighed then glared back at the tree that hid Max. I wasn't sure if I was fortunate or not, but he had disappeared.

I would speak to him later, I decided.

At that moment, Mikhail rose from his seat. "I'm going to get some fresh air," he announced. Lady Terence stood up to follow him.

"Oh, me too—" she started, but Rose called out to her.

"Veronica, shouldn't you set the date for our next tea party?"

Frowning, Lady Terence sat back down. "Darn it! Alright."

I was relieved that things had gone smoothly but then I sighed when I thought about Max again.

This contract... would be okay, right?



"Um, Lady Floyen," a grumpy voice called out. "Why did you sigh after looking at me?"

I glanced up and saw Lady Terence giving me a look. “Oh, I...” I wasn’t a nosy person. My safety came first, and it was a principle of mine that everyone should take care of themselves. But seeing as the face she wore was similar to the ones I’ve made in the past, I couldn’t leave her be. “I’m angry,” I admitted.

“What?” she asked, sounding as if I had said something ridiculous. There was no backing down now.

“I was often ignored as well,” I elaborated.

She stood up from her seat, trembling. “Who are you saying was ignored?”

It was understandable that she didn’t want to admit it. I acknowledged her feelings because I was once like her. “I’m sorry for making you uncomfortable. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.” She continued to glare at me as I apologized. I stood up from my seat. If I stayed here any longer, I was only going to hurt her more. “As promised, I’ll host the next tea party. However, if it will distress you to take part, you don’t have to come. I’ll be going now.”

With these parting words, I left the room.



Meanwhile, Mikhail was wearing a dark expression as he stomped out of the drawing room. How dare that shallow man...!

It was irritating that the man next to Jubelian had scowled at him, but he chose to ignore it because it was ridiculous. He would only end up looking foolish if he vented his anger out on a petty commoner. But after finding out that Jubelian’s attention had been riveted on that man, her face shifting into a myriad of different subtle expressions as she gazed out at him, he felt like his heart had been burnt black.

It couldn’t be true! Mikhail didn’t want to admit to the fact that such a lowlife was able to coax so much feeling out of her. That was why Mikhail glared daggers at Max whenever Jubelian looked away. However, the arrogant commoner only smiled back at him, crudely mimicking a cut to his neck. He was

threatening to kill him.

He was going to massacre that conceited bastard! Mikhail left the mansion in search of Max. Upon passing by a deserted area, he heard a low voice speak up, vulgar words dripping from a commoner's tongue.

"Crawling out of there pretty late, aren't you?" Max taunted, staring at Mikhail with those vicious red eyes of his. He was standing in a dim spot. He had just insulted a nobleman.

That egotist must've lost his sense of fear. Mikhail scowled. One of the virtues the Imperial Knights had to uphold was for them to refrain from boasting about their strength. However, Mikhail had no intention of affording that kind of generosity to the commoner who had just committed mutiny against him.

It would be okay if he just broke the guy's arm, right? He needed punishment, after all, and now Mikhail had a good reason for it. He readied himself to make a move.

Suddenly, a powerful blow swept him aside. In an instant, Max had grabbed him by the collar. It had happened before he could even comprehend it.

Wh-what? What did he just do? His face contorted with effort as he tried to grasp what was happening. Then, Max slammed him to the ground, and he cried out in pain.

He tried his best to lift himself up from the sudden shock when a long shadow descended over him.

"Just as I thought. Crawling suits petty scum," Max spat. There was something akin to madness looming within his crimson curved gaze. Mikhail could only gape in shock.

He had assumed that Max was just a good-looking playboy because of the disinterested expression he wore, but the quick movements he had just demonstrated and the overwhelming pressure from his stare felt completely different from how he did a short while ago.

This man... what on earth was he?

Mikhail's stinging flesh was a constant reminder that the man before him was

dangerous. Nevertheless, he didn't want to back down. Jubelian was a woman who used to follow him blindly, unaware of the dangers that surrounded her. He couldn't tell if she was slow-witted or stupid, but the way she would smile at him even after he had made it obvious he didn't like her made his stomach churn.

He couldn't allow such a dangerous man to remain by that dense woman's side. Although she might've proved lacking in many aspects, she still belonged to him. Mikhail couldn't help but be bothered by the fact that a parasite like Max had attached himself to her.

Mikhail hurriedly scrambled to his feet and glared at him. "You," he began. "Who are you and what makes you think you can stay by Jubelian's side?"

"That's none of your business," Max replied, furrowing his brows slightly.

At Max's unyielding tone, Mikhail drew his sword. He didn't hesitate, immediately pointing the tip at Max's neck. "Tell me!" he demanded, the silver blade in his hand unwavering. He was determined to cut his opponent down mercilessly if the fool chose to keep speaking nonsense.

Even though his life was being threatened, Max remained calm. "Didn't Jubelian already tell you?" he asked. "We're lovers."

The moment he heard those words, Mikhail felt fury crash through him. He wanted to slice through the arrogant man's neck immediately, but he refrained from doing so because he was unsure of how Jubelian would react. He held onto what little patience he had left and raised his voice.

"Bullshit! There's no way she'd love something like you!" he shouted. "Who are you? What purpose—"

A cold, ruthless voice shut him up.

"Mikhail Albert Hessen. Put that sword down," Jubelian demanded.

Mikhail flinched. He never thought he would hear her call his name in such a way.

"Put that sword down right now," she repeated, sharp and commanding.

Mikhail's sword hand fell helplessly to his side. "Jubelian," he called

remorsefully.

Despite his regret, all she offered him was a frigid stare. “It’s not Jubelian. It’s Lady Floyen. Please refrain from disrespecting me, Lord Hessen,” she said.

Even though their statuses only differed by one rank, the gap in power between a duke’s family and a marquis’ family was far from negligible. While dating Jubelian, however, Mikhail had never felt this difference. “*Call me Jubelian, Mikhail,*” she had said.

The woman he knew had always treated him kindly without holding back, but now he could clearly see the distinction between their statuses. She drew a strict line between them.

“I’m sorry, Lady Floyen,” Mikhail said. Deep down, he hoped she would admit that she had made a mistake. He hoped she would hurriedly correct her actions and apologize, but reality differed from his hopes. He received a cold-hearted interrogation instead.

“Why were you pointing your sword at my boyfriend?” she asked, observing him calmly. Her eyes were as blue as the sky and as still as a lake. Even though he had considered her bothersome, Mikhail had always thought her eyes were rather pleasant. “Answer me,” she ordered.

Now, however, he couldn’t help but be taken aback by the hostility in her gaze, by the lack of sympathy in her eyes.

“My lady, I—” Mikhail opened his mouth to make an excuse, but Jubelian cut him off sharply.

“An Imperial Knight drawing his sword so easily? If Father found out about this, he would be displeased,” she said, walking past him toward Max.

“Are you okay?” The tone she used on Max was so warm Mikhail could hardly believe that she was the same person who had just spoken so harshly to him. Looking at her, he could see the gentle care in her eyes. “I told you to wait for me quietly, Max,” she continued.

“I felt cramped in there because the room was so small,” Max complained. She sighed and refrained from making any comments about Max’s informal speech.

“I guess you must have felt rather confined. I’m sorry.”

Mikhail frowned when he heard Jubelian apologize instead of Max. Why was she apologizing when she did nothing wrong...?

Then, upon that thought, he recalled a moment from the past that paralleled the event playing out before him. It was on a day he was irritated at her because she visited him after his training had finished. *“Oh, you must be tired. I’m sorry,”* she had said.

He wasn’t irritated because he was actually tired. He reacted that way because he knew she would accept him no matter what he did. For Mikhail, Jubelian was the most comfortable person to be around. Someone he could always vent his anger on.

It was only now that he realized how terrible he had treated her.

Why did he do that? He watched Jubelian sorrowfully. She held her small, thin hand out to Max.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Mikhail clenched his fists. Her warm, kind eyes; her calm, pleasant voice; and even her small, thin hands had originally been his. He couldn’t lose her to this dangerous man of unknown origins.

Before he could think about his actions, Mikhail angrily stomped toward Jubelian and snatched her wrist away. “Jubelian, we need to talk,” he declared. Gripping onto her slender wrist, he tried to drag her away, but something took hold of his own wrist, stopping him with a rough grab.

“Let go,” Max said, his eyes rife with bloodlust. The force of his gaze suffocated Mikhail. The strength of his grip—almost strong enough to break his forearm—was like that of an angered beast rather than a human.

How dare a mere commoner...!

Mikhail tried to shake Max’s hand off, but oddly enough, it didn’t move an inch. He was about to lash out in fury when Jubelian spoke.

“Stop it, Max.”

At her discouragement, Max almost immediately released his grip, and he

asked himself why he would do such a thing. He was doubting his sanity when he recalled the words he once defiantly declared to his master.

“I think I’ve found it. My weakness.”

Denial washed over him. Him? Having a weakness? There was no way. Max had never been defeated in war. Therefore, he considered himself thoroughly flawless and perfect in every way. It was only natural for him to feel repulsed by such a concept.

“I don’t want to,” he said.

“Please, Max. If you keep acting like this...” Jubelian sighed, trailing off.

Looking into her gaze felt oddly relaxing. “Okay,” he said, finally loosening his crushing grip.

Jubelian smiled at him. “Thank you.”

Mistaking her smile for having been inspired by himself, the corners of Mikhail’s mouth lifted. Yes. This was how it was supposed to be. No matter what he did, Jubelian was always meant to be on his side. Mikhail’s smile widened into a grin as he regained his confidence, his faltering faith returning anew.

That was when Jubelian, who had been facing Max the whole time, turned toward him. Was she finally going to look at him? He joyfully awaited the next moment. However, his happiness was soon crushed when he heard what she said next.

“Get your hand off of me, Mikhail Albert Hessen.”

Her ruthlessness made Mikhail feel as if his heart had been cut into a thousand pieces.



I could see the look of shock on Mikhail’s face as soon as I finished speaking. It was natural for him to react that way since I had always respected him in the

past. This was the first time I had ever exercised my authority on him.

Even so, he should have had an attitude like this toward me from the beginning. I had personally lowered my standards for a man of an inferior status, after all. Now, there was no longer any reason for me to continue showing him the same generosity I used to afford him since I had a higher social status as the daughter of a duke.

“Didn’t I tell you to let go? Can you not hear me?” I questioned Mikhail. Eventually, he released my hand without any objections. I scowled at him as I felt my tender wrist. Judging from the red mark he left on me, I was going to end up with a bruise.

He was really annoying me. Since I felt guilty for how I pestered him in the past, I was being as considerate as I could, but I had no reason to continue if he was just going to treat me callously.

“Forcefully touching others without their consent is an act of violence. I hope you haven’t done this to anyone else,” I scolded courageously. Then, I remembered that Max had grabbed Mikhail’s wrist as if to damage it a few moments ago. Since Max had hurt him in return, I could call us even.

“However, because of what my boyfriend has done, I will forgive your rudeness,” I continued with a sigh. At the word *forgive*, he raised his head.

“What’s your reason for ignoring me after you used to tell me that you loved me so much?” he asked somberly.

I was somewhat puzzled by this question, so I frowned at him. Wait, wouldn’t pretending not to know him be better? At this point, I really wasn’t sure if replying to his illogical yammering was worth it.

Mikhail smirked at my dumbfounded expression, taking it for something other than it was. “By any chance, are you trying to get my attention?”

What kind of shift in attitude was this? You couldn’t even call this ridiculous anymore; he had just gone crazy. I had no idea why he was doing this to me again. His strange behavior was starting to give me a headache, but I regained my sense of reason when I finally divided his motivations.

Ah, I got it. He was probably paranoid because I stalked him for the past two

years... it was a bit unfortunate, but if I left things as they were, then he might keep coming up with bizarre explanations for my behavior in the future.

“I’ll make this clearer for you: I’m no longer interested in you,” I explained. I spoke politely to him out of pity, but I clearly stated my disinterest. This should be good enough, right?

I thought I had resolved the misunderstanding, but contrary to my expectations, he began to shout, his face contorted in pain. “You said you loved me!”

What he said was an undeniable fact, so I nodded. “Yes, I did.”

He looked at me with a peculiar expression nestled on his face. He was wondering if I was going to change my mind. I could see it in the slight flush on his cheeks and the tremor in his violet eyes. If I thought about it, I probably could’ve figured out exactly what he was thinking, and if I had been who I used to be, I probably would’ve gotten my hopes up. None of that mattered now, however. I had already ended my relationship with him.

“But I don’t anymore,” I finished.

I approached Max, who had been watching us with a scowl. “Let’s go,” I said, but he didn’t budge an inch.

He was probably sulking because I told him to let go of Mikhail’s wrist. I locked my arm around his and spoke gently as if to sooth a small child. “I’ll buy you cake, so please stop being mad at me, okay?”

At that moment, he flinched, moved his arm so that it would be easier for us to link together. Did he want cake that much? What a simple guy. I rewarded him with a smile before glancing back at Mikhail and addressing him one last time.

“From now on, don’t talk to me anymore. I don’t want to get involved with you ever again,” I said sincerely. Then, I began walking to my carriage.

What kind of cake should we eat today?



Long after the two had disappeared from sight, Mikhail continued to stand there absentmindedly.

She didn't love him anymore? His body shook with anger and betrayal when he recalled her shocking remark.

"From now on, don't talk to me anymore. I don't want to get involved with you ever again."

It was hard to believe that the same mouth that had once whispered words of love and praise in his ears had begun to spout nonsense. Mikhail's eyes gleamed dangerously as he clenched his fists. *Don't be ridiculous. I never agreed to your request,* he swore silently.

Suddenly, a set of slender fingers wrapped around his wrist. Assuming they belonged to Jubelian, Mikhail eagerly turned, but his expression hardened when he saw who it was.

"Are you okay, Sir Mikhail?" Veronica asked.

Irritation surged within him at Veronica's appearance. "Don't touch me. You're a nuisance," he hissed, roughly pushing her away.

Veronica gaped after Mikhail in disbelief. How could he have done that to her? She was on the verge of tears when a dreadfully bleak voice came to mind.

"I was often ignored as well," Jubelian had said earlier.

Veronica had misunderstood because she thought Jubelian was laughing at her. Now she knew what the lady had meant when she had spoken with those eyes full of sympathy.

Oh, she had been through the same thing... Veronica laughed dejectedly as tears rolled down her cheeks.



"Do you like it?"

Max nodded at my question. “Yes,” he said. He was attractive and pleasant to look at even while eating, which I had expected from a handsome man like him. The descriptor of being *stunning*, which people used to describe celebrities they spotted in person, was the perfect label for him.

If the Internet existed in this world, then he could’ve made a lot of money with a cake eating show or something like it. I was deeply entrenched in my ridiculous thoughts when I noticed he was glaring at me.

“Why do you keep staring at me?” he questioned.

“Oh, I just have something to say.”

With some cake cream on his lips, he finished all of his attention on me. “What is it?”

I sighed. Would this headstrong guy ever listen to me? Just a while ago, he was climbing into a tree one second and confronting Mikhail in the next. I had considered ending the contract because of this reckless and impulsive behavior, but since he viewed me in a positive light and was helping me, I decided to try persuading him instead.

“I want you to be more careful in front of others in the future,” I started.

“That’s why I spoke formally to you,” he responded calmly.

“No, not that... I’m talking about things like what had happened with Mikhail.”

He squinted as if he couldn’t understand what I was saying. “What about it?”

“If you’re not careful, you can get in big trouble,” I said, expressing my concern.

However, he only continued to stare at me skeptically. “Do you really think I’d lose against someone as weak as him?”

His triumphant expression was full of groundless confidence. I let out another sigh. “No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

Rather than a democratic society, this novel’s setting was based on a strict absolute monarchy. Since it was a place where people were firmly divided into classes, the reality was that commoners couldn’t protest even if they were subjected to horribly unfair things.

“If you get into a conflict with a noble—” I tried to explain to him that it would be legally disadvantageous for a commoner to clash against a noble, but he cut me off and dismissed me as if he didn’t want to hear it.

“I can take on ten of those weaklings with no problem.”

Winning and losing wasn’t the important thing about all this, but I gave up on trying to explain when I realized he just couldn’t comprehend the essence of the issue. It didn’t matter how skilled he was if his opponent was a noble.

I sighed. Although I had saved Max from Baron Gordon and angrily shut Mikhail down, the only reason they couldn’t retaliate was because of my status. Usually, conflicts about inequality were only resolved between nobles. If a commoner confronted a nobleman and they weren’t particularly lucky, they could be beaten or even killed. This was why most commoners chose to live with the injustice rather than raise a fuss.

I didn’t know if it was because I had grown attached to Father’s disciple in the short span of time we had known each other, but I wanted this naïve man to live a life unburdened by troubles.

“Still, you never know when you might get hurt,” I said.

“I won’t,” he replied.

My voice rose from frustration. “I’m only saying this because I’ve been worried! So—” I was about to tell him to stay quiet and avoid causing conflict when I froze, noticing the strange expression on his face.

“You were worried that I’d get hurt?” he asked.

“Oh, um... well, yes...”

It was true that I was worried about him getting hurt, but I was more worried that he would cause a big problem and end up being sentenced to death. However, I decided against telling him that.

An awkward silence followed, and he furrowed his eyebrows. “Why?” he eventually asked, confused.

“Because I don’t want anyone—including myself—to get hurt,” I said.

“I already told you that I won’t.”

He seemed to be pretty confident in his combat skills since he was Father's disciple. I locked eyes with him.

"No matter how strong you are and how high of a position you're in, you can still be defeated."

It had happened to me in the original novel. Father was a hero and I had a grand status as the daughter of a duke, but everyone had turned their backs on me during a crucial moment. In the end, the only option left for me in that crisis was death.

I smiled bitterly. "No matter how strong and remarkable you are, you shouldn't be overconfident about your situation or abilities. The moment the majority becomes your enemy, they will wait for the day you are weakened."

When I thought about my future, I became overwhelmed with hopelessness. I guess it was easier said than done.

"I don't understand," Max said, looking at me with a serious expression.

I was dumbfounded by his ignorant response to my earnest words. I knew it. It was too much for a person who talked down to me to understand in the first place. Differences in power meant nothing to him. I gave up on trying to explain it to him and decided to get straight to the point.

"That's not what matters now. What I mean—"

"You're telling me to refrain from creating conflict with nobles while I'm with you," he cut in, displeased.

My expression hardened. I didn't think he would just blurt the answer out like that after how he had been answering this entire time. I froze in astonishment but then frowned. I thought he couldn't understand, but he knew what I was talking about all along?

Even though he seemed to get it, I regarded him with suspicion because there was still a chance he would disagree with me. "So, are you willing to accept my request?" I asked carefully.

"Okay. I won't fight with others while I'm with you," he immediately answered. It wasn't a very reliably-made statement, but the problem was

resolved for now. Alright, now I had to...

I took out a handkerchief and handed it to him.

“What’s this for?” he asked, taking it from me.

“Wipe the cream off your lips.” It had been bothering me throughout our entire conversation.

He scrunched his nose and did as I asked.



When he got back to his residence, Max scowled. Did she think he would lose to someone like Mikhail? Max hated it when anyone looked down on him. He normally wouldn’t have allowed for an assumption like that to be made.

Then, he recalled what Jubelian had said to him in the past: *“You told me you owe someone, right? Take this and help that person out.”*

It was arrogant of his master’s daughter to look down on him and try to take care of him. Except for his master, he had never lost a fight against anyone. He didn’t need her charity. Max fumed, frustrated, before remembering what she had said earlier.

“I’m only saying this because I’m worried! So—”

He loosened his clenched fists. He really didn’t understand. Despite his determination to resolve her misconceptions, he wasn’t really upset anymore. It was strange. What he wanted instead was to never miss a single word that fell from her lips.

Just... why? He had thought hard about this problem before, but no matter how long he pondered over it, he couldn’t come up with an answer for it. Max looked at the cake box he received from Jubelian and glowered.

“Even though I hate sweets, she still gave me this useless gift.” Unlike his displeased murmur, however, his eyes were soft.

At that moment, the door opened and Fresia stepped in. “Lord Maximillian, I

have a report on something you asked me to investigate... oh my!" she exclaimed. "What's with the cake?"

Max straightened his face. "It's nothing," he said, but his eyes were still fixed on the cake box.

Her instincts were warning her; Fresia knew if she touched that cake, she would be in big trouble. "Oh, alright," she continued awkwardly. "I'll just give you the report first, then—"

"This cake is expensive."

Fresia flinched at Max's sudden statement. What did he want her to say to that? She was flustered, but she managed to answer with a smile. "Ah, I see."

As if unsatisfied, Max's eyes sharpened at her response. "Apparently, it's from the best tearoom in the capital," he added.

Although it was only a fake identity, Fresia was still the owner of the largest salon in the capital. She could instantly guess what Max's intentions were with this cake talk. Was he telling her to praise it? This was some rather unusual behavior from her lord because he usually hated sweets, but she decided to compliment the cake anyway. Just in case.

"The decorations are certainly lovely. The strawberries seem fresh, as well."

"Yes. Because it's a cake boasted by the best tearoom in the capital."

Although they were just flattering remarks to please him, she could tell Max was smiling. Narrowing her eyes slightly, she came to a conclusion: it must've been a gift from Lady Floyen.

"Fresia," Max called her.

"Ah, yes, my lord." She donned a serious air as she waited for Max to continue in case he was about to give an order.

After a short pause, he resumed speaking. "Since you've worked so hard all this time... I'll give you this cake as a special gift."

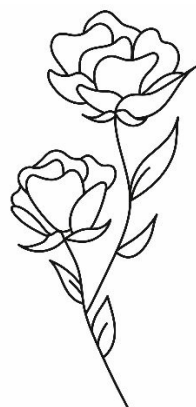
Fresia couldn't believe her ears. Did the lord just offer to share his precious cake with her? With her wealth, she could buy as many cakes as she wanted, but this was the first time Maximillian ever personally gifted her anything, so

she knew that this cake must've been very special.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said. “I’ll make sure to savor every bite I take.”

Max nodded at her display of emotion. “Don’t eat it all. Half of it is mine.”

Fresia knitted her brows. If he was going to give it to her, wouldn’t it have been better to give her all of it? He didn’t even like sweets...



A Breakthrough

I sighed when I arrived back home. I had resolved the problem with Max, but what should I do about the tea tasting party?

A novelty tea party. It was a simple concept, but I honestly didn't have any confidence in it. If I spent too much money preparing for it, Father might kick me out.

It wasn't strange for me to be moved when the ladies at the tea party offered Marilyn some tea. In this world, the value of tea was extremely high. It was so expensive that even the middle class couldn't so much as dream about having it.

What I drank today was white tea... which was more expensive than regular tea.

There were many different types of tea and they were usually divided by their acidity or how they were fermented. However, the raw material for each tea was the same: a tea tree called *Camellia sinensis*. White tea was made by collecting the sprouts that still had silver hairs on them, which meant that only a limited quantity could be made. That was why it was so expensive.

I would have to prepare a tea similar to that to avoid disgracing Rose...

Although I no longer cared if my image was damaged, I felt different about Rose because she had been cultivating her reputation in high society for a while now. If I invited people to a tea tasting party and served them average tea, then the people who would find fault with my halfhearted attempt might criticize Rose as well.

Was there a solution to this problem? As I thought hard about the different things I could do, I heard a voice at the door.

"My lady, this is Marilyn."

"Come on in."

With my permission, Marilyn opened the door and came inside. She held a bouquet made up of various types of flowers in her arms.

“Wow, they’re pretty,” I exclaimed.

Marilyn smiled and nodded. “Aren’t they? I went out to the garden for something and saw how delightful they were, so I decided to bring some to put in the vase.”

“Yes, they look absolutely wonderful.”

I gazed at the vivid flowers for a while before a thought suddenly came to mind.

Wait—yes. That was it...!

I approached Marilyn. “Marilyn, by any chance...”

I explained what I had in mind. Her eyes shone brightly as she nodded. “Of course. There’s a lot of them.”

I smiled, satisfied by her answer. Alright. I might not be able to pass the test to become a member of the tea tasting party, but with this, I should at least be able to save face.



The next day I tried to go for a walk early in the morning, but Marilyn stopped me from doing so. “My lady, you can’t go out in those clothes,” she said.

“Why?” I didn’t understand. Even though I was wearing a chemise which was meant for the indoors, I wasn’t planning on going anywhere far away. Just the front of my house.

“It won’t be long before the sun rises,” she explained. “You must wear a gown and a hat to protect your delicate skin.”

It was true that I easily flushed red if I stayed in the sun for too long because of how sensitive my skin was. I understood her concern now. “Alright,” I said.

Marilyn smiled softly. “I’ll get you ready, then.”

I sighed as I watched her. I didn't know why Marilyn just couldn't leave me alone these days. In the past, I clearly remembered that she tried to minimize interfering with me as much as she could, but now she meddled in everything I did. It actually felt really awkward having someone take care of me and getting all concerned for me like this.

Was it because I lived alone and away from my mom in my past life? Was it because I was an only child now?

Marilyn approached me with a gown and hat in hand. "I'll dress you up, my lady."

It was strange. She was treating me like a child, but instead of getting offended, I laughed.

"Why are you laughing, my lady?" she asked.

"It's nothing," I said, looking at her. If she continued to treat me like this, I knew I was going to get attached. I decided to hold back on what I was going to say. Someday, I was going to leave this place and I would have to say goodbye to her. It would be better for me if I didn't become too affectionate with her.

"Thank you," I said after she finished getting me ready.

She smiled sweetly at my gratitude. "It's no problem."

I stared at her for a moment then lowered my gaze. I shouldn't get my hopes up. This way... I won't be hurt again.



I looked around the garden while walking with Marilyn. It seemed like there were roses, pansies, and all kinds of other flowers here. Since it was early summer, they were in full bloom, making them more beautiful than ever.

Would these roses and flowers work?

As I was about to cut off a rose stem with the flower scissors I brought with me when someone called out to me. "What are you doing here?"

I glanced back and saw Max staring at me. “Oh... When did you arrive?” I asked.

He looked irritated. “Just now.”

I studied his expression and sighed. What was he upset about this time?

He then pointed to the flower scissors I was holding. “Why are you carrying something like that? It’s dangerous.”

Dangerous? They were just a pair of scissors... It was absurd for him to say such a thing, but I knew that he was going to keep bothering me if I didn’t answer him.

“I wanted to pick some roses.”

Max quirked an eyebrow at my response. “Why would you do something like that when you can order one of your servants to do it for you?” he asked, even though he was a commoner himself. This reminded me of the fact that he was a difficult person to understand by my standards.

“Oh, it’s...”

I opened my mouth to say something, but then I closed it. If I ordered people to do tedious things for me while on the verge of being kicked out, then they would definitely hate me. However, if I tried explaining that to him, telling him that I didn’t want to cause any trouble in the future, he was just going to look at me as if I was crazy.

If I hadn’t been the villainess of this novel, I wouldn’t be trying to save myself like this. I grieved over my situation.

Then, Max reached out to me. “Give those scissors to me,” he said.

“No. I want to do this myself,” I responded belatedly, but I knew there was no way a stubborn man like him would just quietly listen to me.

“Come on,” he urged. I sighed at his unyielding attitude and handed the scissors over. Then, he gave them to Marilyn, a sharp look flashing through his eyes. “She could’ve been pricked by the thorns or she could’ve accidentally cut herself with the scissors. As the head maid, shouldn’t you be the one taking care of things like this?” he asked.

As a fallen noblewoman, Merilyn held a higher social status than Max, but his warning tone sounded so natural. It was as if he had ruled over others for a long time. However, since I already had some insight on his true identity, I immediately discredited this absurd idea.

Well, the truth was that he was just clueless about worldly affairs.

Nevertheless, Merilyn, ignorant of his identity, humbly apologized and accepted the scissors. His aggressive aura had overwhelmed her. "This was due to my negligence. I'm sorry," she said.

Max had essentially earned an apology for one of the most ridiculous reasons. He observed me idly for a moment before opening his mouth. "For the sake of your lady, I'll forgive you."

What? Who was he to forgive my maid? I was a little annoyed, but I knew that if I tried to start an argument with him, I would just use up all my energy. I gazed at the flowers in disappointment and sighed. I should pick these later.

Having nothing else to do here, I was about to walk away when Max spoke. "So, how many do you need?" he asked.

Without thinking, I said the first number that came to mind. "Um, about twenty?"

As soon as I finished speaking, a metallic sound rang through the air and a silver flash sparked before my eyes. His arms had moved so fast that I didn't even realize he had swung his sword. When the roses he had cut with his sword fell scattered to the ground, I registered what he had done.

He... just tried to help me cut the roses, right?

I felt somewhat strange as I blankly stared at him.

He turned his head slightly and said, "Stay still and don't make any unnecessary movements. You'll just get in my way."

If it weren't for his harsh manners, I would've thought that he was being kind. It was amazing how he spoke in a way that seemed to contradict his actions. Still, he helped me once again.

In any case, it was true that his considerate behavior made me feel weird. This

wasn't the first time, either; he had done several other kind things for me before. A crazy idea came to mind, but I didn't think it was an impossible one.

Max, who had no idea what I was thinking, diligently trimmed the stems of the roses. Gathering them together in a bouquet, he handed them to me. "Here," he said.

"Oh, thank you."

"It's good that you know to thank me, at least."

His bluntness had me dismissing my delusional suppositions. I knew it. There was no way he would.

"So, what other flowers do you need?" he asked.

I didn't know if cutting the flowers was fun for him or something, but unlike his tone of voice, he looked excited. I let out a sigh. Should I consider this a form of donating his talents?



"Your Majesty, Viscount Shaer, who was sent as an envoy to the crown prince, has returned."

"Tell him to come in."

A short middle-aged man soon entered and saluted the emperor. "I greet the Sun of the Great Empire."

Instead of acknowledging the greeting, the emperor skipped directly to the matter at hand. "What did the crown prince say?"

At the emperor's aggressive tone, Viscount Shaer hesitated for a second before opening his mouth. "Ah, he says that he has yet to settle the dispute... there have actually been several battles against the barbarians."

The emperor clicked his tongue. "What an incompetent man! Get out of here!"

The atmosphere grew heavy as Viscount Shaer meekly left the emperor's

office. The grand chamberlain, sneaking glances at the upset emperor, carefully tried to speak.

“There is still one more piece of news,” he said.

“What is it now?”

“I was told that there have been suspicious movements in the south.”

The emperor glared at him fiercely. “What?! Give that to me now!” he viciously commanded.

The grand chamberlain hurriedly handed the report he held over to the emperor. The emperor’s entire body trembled soon after he examined it. “Marquis Lennox reported having a reduced number of troops to the capital and is training extra men at the border instead?”

He tore up the report, his eyes shining icily.

“Tell Duke Floyen to come to the imperial palace immediately,” he harshly demanded.



By the time I had finished preparing for the tea tasting party with Max’s help, it was already evening. “Time flies, doesn’t it?” I grinned at him. “It’ll be time for dinner soon.”

“Alright,” he responded quietly. “I’ll get going then.” It was as if he thought I was kicking him out.

Although that wasn’t my intention, I did make him work for me the entire day. There was no way I could tell him to leave in good conscience without inviting him to dinner, so I hurriedly grabbed his arm.

His eyes grew wide. “What is it?” he asked.

“Why don’t you stay for dinner?”

He seemed a little reluctant to accept. Since it was in his nature to appear briefly before vanishing, I locked my arm around his to prevent him from doing

so. “Let’s go,” I said. Then, I turned to Marilyn and asked, “Could you go to the kitchen and inform the chef that there’ll be a guest today?”

“Yes, my lady,” Marilyn said. Then, she left. Only then did I realize that there was a problem.

Father was home... would this be okay?

I was used to dining with Father, but I thought Max might feel uncomfortable. Even though we were in a contractual relationship just to show Father I was dating someone, I wanted to prioritize his feelings since he had helped me today.

“By the way... Father will be home. Will that be okay with you? We can eat outside if you’re not comfortable with—”

He cut me off firmly. “It doesn’t matter.”

Rather than relief, I started feeling anxious when faced with his compliance. Hopefully nothing bad would happen.



In all honesty, Max didn’t want to join Jubelian for dinner if his master was going to be there, but he couldn’t refuse her. If she asked him like that, there was no way he could refuse. It would be annoying, but he should be nice to her.

Max justified his actions then looked at Jubelian. Remembering the dizzying situation she was in earlier today, he sighed. Did she have no sense of danger?

She was trying to cut a thorny rose with her bare hands, running around dangerously with a pair of scissors in hand. Max couldn’t leave her alone since she was essentially defenseless, behaving clumsily in everything she did. Even now...

“Max, the dining room isn’t that way. It’s over here—ah!” Jubelian started stumbling after she lost her footing.

Why was she so careless? Max rushed to catch her fall.

“Oh, thank you,” she said.

He didn’t know why, but the sensation of his arms wrapped around her thin waist struck him vividly. Her lips, plush and pink, also stood out more to him than usual. As if he were possessed, he couldn’t take his eyes off of her. He started feeling lightheaded, a strange impulse rising within him.

Unconsciously, he leaned forward, Jubelian’s face gradually coming closer and closer. When he could feel her breath on his face, something caught his eye.

“Max?”

He pulled back in shock after noticing how her periwinkle eyes seemed to watch him in wonder. What did he just...?!

He frantically distanced himself from her.

“Max, what’s wrong all of a sudden?”

He could hear her, but there was no way he could answer her truthfully. It was the first time he had ever felt something like this and the more he dwelled on it, the more embarrassed and ashamed he became. Afraid that Jubelian might see his flushed face, he turned his head away.

“Stop being so clumsy from now on,” he told her. In truth, he just wanted to tell her to be more careful, but his voice came out curt instead. Regardless, he couldn’t take it back now since he was worried she would discover his strange state if he said something sweet to her.

Suddenly, he felt a soft touch on his arm. Before he knew it, Jubelian had slipped her arm around his, pouting all the while. “You were the one who was walking too fast in the first place,” she murmured. “I was just trying to follow you.”

If she were anyone else, they would’ve been decapitated for their arrogance, but interestingly enough, Max didn’t mind when she spoke to him in such a way.

“Alright,” he said. “I’ll make sure to walk slowly.”

Jubelian nodded at Max’s words. “Don’t forget, okay?”

Normally, Max would’ve considered it an unimaginable thing to adjust himself

to others' needs. He thought those who were slow and prone to lagging behind him were a burden meant to be abandoned. Now that he tempered his pace, however, an unexpected feeling arose inside of him.

Maybe it was okay to go slow sometimes.



As usual, I sucked in a breath when I saw Father's elegant figure sitting at the table. As expected, he was here.

It was true that I had many concerns about my relationship with Max since it had developed differently from what I had imagined, but I had no intention of backing down since I had already come this far. My topmost priority was to avoid getting engaged to the crown prince.

I looked straight into Father's cold blue eyes and said, "Father, as the butler should have announced, Max will be dining with us today."

I wasn't sure whether it was a second or a minute that had passed after I spoke, but it felt like an eternity and an instant in equal measure. Amidst the silence, Father was glaring at us with eyes like daggers.

He already hated me anyway. Instead of being so conscious about him, should I just sit myself down?

"Sit down," he suddenly said.

Relief washed through me. I had his permission. "Sit next to me," I said to Max.

Typically, the proper thing for him to do would be to sit across from me, but I figured that it would be better if I was right next to him so I could teach him table manners since he probably wasn't familiar with them. When Max and I sat down, the servants served us soup and appetizers to begin our meal.

"You can eat it using the spoon furthest to the right," I quietly told him, assuming his ignorance.

“I know how to...” He sighed, abandoning the sentence. “Alright,” he said instead. “I understand.”

He began to grumble as usual, but then he suddenly changed his tone. I must’ve been right. He really didn’t know how to use the silverware.

He was probably unaccustomed to situations like this... he must’ve felt really uncomfortable. My original plan had been to treat him to a meal, but now I felt like I was putting more unnecessary pressure on him. I pitied him, becoming increasingly remorseful for putting him in such a predicament.

One of the servants bringing us food approached us. “Dear guest, the main dish for today is steak,” they said. “How would you like it cooked?”

Steak was prepared by grilling the entirety of the meat. It was considered a fairly high-end dish here. Commoners usually put meat in a stew or cooked it into steamed dishes, so I assumed there was no way he would know how he wanted his steak cooked.

“Medium rare for both of us, please,” I said, answering for him.

I caught Max glaring at me. He was doubtlessly appreciative of my help in this burdensome situation. I smiled at him. We made it this far, so I planned to keep helping him. That way, he didn’t need to face any more hardships. And...

I glanced at Father and recalled my original motive for starting this contractual relationship. If I showed him that Max and I were an affectionate couple, then... would he give up on getting me married?



Max hated undercooked meat. Ever since he had been a kid, he didn’t like bloody meat. That was why he was taken aback when Jubelian had decided upon the steak’s doneness on her own.

“Beef isn’t good when it’s cooked too long. Medium rare is the perfect amount of grilling,” she said with a smile.

Max couldn’t bear to criticize her when she beamed at him like that. It

couldn't be helped. With a sigh, he took some salad from the bowl and put it onto his plate.

"You can eat the salad with that fork," Jubelian said, pointing at the salad fork. Max already knew everything she told him, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything in retaliation.

"You have some sauce here," she noted, wiping his mouth with a napkin. It was a pleasant experience.

She was so devoted. He had to be kind to her.

At that moment, the main dish came out. Matthew, the chef of the Floyen household, bowed in silence before introducing the dish he prepared. "Today's meal is calf steak with truffles. They're cooked medium rare for a smooth texture."

Max wasn't impressed with Chef Matthew's explanations. He had eaten enough steak in his life to grow sick and tired of it.

After the main dishes were placed in front of everyone, Jubelian picked up her knife. Would she be okay? Max worried about her. As he watched Jubelian pick up the sharp utensils with her pale hands, he felt uneasy. If she ended up cutting herself...

If he could've, he would've taken the knife from her and cut her steak for her instead.

Jubelian looked over at Max with curious eyes. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Oh, it's just..." He couldn't tell her that he couldn't eat because he was worried about her. "I was just about to eat..."

He was going to make up an excuse, but he wasn't quick enough. His eyes widened in surprise.

Why was she taking his plate all of a sudden?

As if to answer him, Jubelian spoke pompously, her knife in hand. "Since it's rather difficult, I'll cut it for you."

Max was stunned at her ridiculous claim. She was going to go as far as to do this for him? He wasn't even a little kid! Max had learned his table manners at

six years old. He knew how to use all his silverware by then. Ever since, neither his mother nor his nanny had offered to cut his meat for him. Furthermore, he didn't want her to use a knife with hands as delicate as hers.

"No. I can do it myself—" Max straightened himself and tried to take his plate back, but she interrupted him firmly.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm good at cutting."

It was impossible to believe her claim after witnessing how unskillfully she cut her steak. She was driving him crazy.

"Jubelian," Regis called coldly. Max narrowed his eyes.

She stopped cutting the steak, glancing up at her father. "Yes?"

In Regis' eyes, Max had treated Jubelian with thorough indifference despite all the effort she put into helping him cut his steak. His disciple's reactions reminded Regis of Mikhail, causing his eyes to grow cold.

He knew that Max's true intention was to use his daughter to win him over.

He had already repaid the debt he owed to the late empress in full by protecting Max until adulthood, so he regarded Max with fierce eyes. It wouldn't hurt to show that kid the power of his authority.

He slowly clenched his fists, stopping only when he heard his daughter's voice.

"Father?"

Regis looked at his daughter. She was the apple of his eye, and he felt sorry for her. She was trying so hard because she was blinded by love. He had to put up with Max for a while... but only because she liked the brat so much.

Regis pushed his patience to its greatest limit. "I'll cut the steak for you," he bit out.



I was taken aback by Father's offer. Did he just say that he would cut the

steak? My eyes trembled slightly until I noticed where he was looking. Oh, was that what was going on? Father was gazing at Max.

It looked like he wanted to make up with him. It was true that he had always cared more about his disciple than his own daughter, after all...

I should help them make peace. It would be better for me if Father and Max got along again because I had been bothered ever since I accidentally forced their relationship apart. Father might give up on marrying me off to the crown prince if it was for his disciple's sake.

"Okay. Thank you, Father," I said as I gladly handed the plate over to him.

"What a difference there is between the inside and outside," Father said while cutting.

Was it because it was medium rare? From the outside, it looked pretty well cooked, but it was definitely still a bit reddish on the inside. Still, I figured it had been cooked plenty enough... I was almost drooling at the sight of the juices seeping out of the meat.

"You should always be careful. If there's too much of a difference between what's on the outside and what's on the inside, you might end up spilling blood," Father continued.

He was right. Even if I told a servant or the chef how I wanted the meat to be cooked in advance, it was sometimes served to me undercooked. There had also been times where I had absentmindedly cut into the meat and lost my appetite because it just started bleeding afterwards.

Well, in a situation like that, it could always be grilled again, I thought peacefully.

"Here," Father said as he handed me the plate back.

"Oh, thank you." When I handed the plate over to Max, I saw him open his mouth to say thank you, but Father spoke before him, ruining the opportunity.

"Jubelian."

"Yes?"

Father extended his hand out to me. "Hand over your plate as well."

My heart fluttered weakly at the realization of what he planned to do, but the feeling subsided as soon as it came. I guess it would look pretty weird helping his disciple while neglecting his daughter.

However, differing from my gloomy thoughts, I spoke with a slightly pleased tone. "Thank you," I replied. Because there was a chance that Father and Max might make up, I was content and filled with hope. Nevertheless, I had no choice but to heave a sigh soon after.

There was no sign of reconciliation afterward. Even though Father had cut Max's steak for him, the two had not exchanged a single word. Seeing how they kept glancing at each other, it didn't seem like they wanted to avoid it or anything...

At that moment, Father looked into my eyes and said, "Let's have tea later."

Suddenly, I realized something and chuckled. The person he actually wanted to have tea with was probably Max, and he was only using me as an excuse. He really... cared a lot about Max.

"Will that be okay?" I asked Max. I wasn't sure what he wanted to say, but he gazed at me for a while before slowly nodding his head. I had expected this response from how he kept glancing at Father throughout the dinner. He wanted to make up with Father as well, after all.

They were finally going to forgive each other. If they fixed their relationship, there was a chance that Father might approve of me dating Max and cancel my blind date with the crown prince. If that happened, I could simply continue to pretend to go out with Max until the prince eventually got married.

Imagining a hopeful future, I spoke with joy. "Then, let's drink some of the tea I made today."

As soon as I said that, both of their expressions changed remarkably. Father's face hardened and Max narrowed his eyes at me. Hm? Did they distrust the tea I made? It was true that I needed some test subjects to taste my tea since I wasn't feeling confident about it, but...

Feeling embarrassed, I quickly offered another option. "Or maybe we can just drink some other tea..." I trailed off.

Suddenly, the butler approached Father with a report. “Master, a messenger is here from the palace.”

“What’s so important that it’s interrupting my dinner?” Father asked, irritated.

Derrick studied Father’s face for a moment before opening his mouth. “The emperor wishes to summon you to the imperial palace immediately—”

“For what?” Max, who was next to me, cut in, joining the conversation.

“Oh, that’s...”

I felt sorry for Derrick. He was just diligently doing his job, but he ended up getting run over by these men.

“It sounds urgent. We can drink tea next time,” I said. Then, I held Max’s hand tightly, worried he would start something again. “Let’s go.”

I was afraid that he was going to protest, but he quietly followed beside me. Reconciliation was probably off the table for now... I felt regretful.

“It’s not urgent.”

I stopped when I heard Father’s resolute voice. Even with his status as a duke, it was still a shocking remark.

“But... it’s an order from the emperor,” I responded carefully.

His stubborn attitude didn’t fade. “This is more important to me.”

I understood that making up with his disciple was important to him, but couldn’t help but be concerned about him acting against the emperor’s orders like this. My gaze trembled with confusion.

Then, I heard Max’s cool and collected voice sympathize with Father’s nonsense. “I concur,” he said.

I frowned at Max. He hadn’t said a single word to Father before this, but now he was earnestly agreeing with him. This wasn’t the time! I was irritated so I turned to Derrick for some help in this chaotic situation, but he kept his head down for some reason, a stiff expression on his face. A sigh escaped my mouth. Was I the only one being reasonable here?

With a sense of duty in mind, I calmed myself. Then, I agonized over what to do next. No matter how much the two of them were willing to make up, this was wrong. Disobeying the emperor's orders constituted disloyalty. Even if Father was renowned as the hero of the empire, he would be considered a disgrace if he defied the emperor's orders.

I didn't want to be on bad terms with the royal family. My original future dictated that the emperor would become furious with me for envying the crown princess. Then, the crown prince would drive me to kill myself. Going right along with them, Father had turned a blind eye to me.

To be honest, I hated trying to read other people's thoughts since it was a tiring thing to do, but if I wanted to live, I had to avoid getting on others' bad side. I had to look after myself. With this decision in mind, I began my plea.

"But Father, you shouldn't disobey the emperor's orders. If it truly turns out to be urgent—"

Despite my perfectly reasonable rebuttal, Father shook his head. "It's fine. There are plenty of other people out there skilled enough to take my place if I choose not to go."

It was an unbelievable statement, but in a way, it made sense.

"Master is right, so let's go have tea," Max chimed in.

I frowned slightly at Max. Now he was suddenly calling Father his master again. It looked like they had already made up... did we still need to drink tea?



The emperor couldn't believe his son had the nerve not to show up yet... resting his fingers on the arms of his throne, he clenched his fists. Soon, the grand chamberlain entered the room.

"Have you heard from Duke Floyen?" the emperor asked him.

"He says he will come to the palace tomorrow since it's late in the day," the grand chamberlain replied.

The emperor began questioning the grand chamberlain angrily. “What? Did those words really come out of his mouth?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Although Regis had made excuses many times before, this was the first time he had blatantly refused his orders. The emperor stared at the ring on his finger and scrunched his face in annoyance.

Regis was rebelling now, it seemed... What on earth was he planning to do?



I brewed some of the tea I had prepared for the tea tasting party and fished out the leaves. Based on the scent that lingered on the tip of my nose, I considered my attempt rather successful. I hoped it would suit their tastes.

Father elegantly lifted the teacup to his lips then placed it back down. “The tea tastes good,” he said. At his praise, I glanced at Max.

He nodded in agreement. “It smells pretty good.”

For a man who once complained about tea being tasteless to now approve of it... I had roughly guessed my way through the brewing process, but I was glad it turned out well. This should get me through the tea tasting party. I smiled.

Then, I met Father’s eyes.

Why was he looking at me like that? I was thinking of avoiding his gaze since it was making me uncomfortable, but he lowered his eyes before I could, speaking softly.

“It’s great,” he said.

His unexpected compliment made me more flustered than happy. I barely had any memories of Father praising me, but he said it was great? To me? My heart wavered. I felt that if I allowed myself to lower my guard even the slightest bit, I was going to relapse into my past self, begging him fruitlessly for affection. I suppressed the expectations that arose within me and adopted a mantra of

defense: *Don't expect anything, Jubelian*, I silently told myself.

He had told his young daughter never to visit him again, despite how desperately she missed him and how she had endured a cold winter day to see him. Using training as an excuse, he neglected to attend his daughter's once-in-a-lifetime debutante ball. There could be no way that he was praising me from the bottom of his heart. It was impossible to consider that he might have changed. The moment I recalled the reality of this fact, all of my senses became numb.

"Thank you," I replied mechanically.

He glanced at Max. "I want you to go upstairs first," he told me. "I have something to discuss with my disciple."

I was confused, but then everything suddenly made sense. He must've praised me so he could get an in and spend some time alone with his disciple.

Alright. That was good enough for me.

My heart ached peculiarly, but I concealed how I felt and forced a smile onto my face. It was good that they were making up with each other.

"Of course," I said. "Take your time."



When the door closed and the sound of Jubelian's footsteps gradually faded away, Max and Regis openly unveiled the murderous auras they had hidden away until now.

"What nonsense are you planning?" Regis demanded.

Max frowned and scoffed. "Nonsense?"

Regis glared at his despicable disciple. "Why do you keep lingering around my daughter?"

Max smirked at his master's question. "Why do you think? It's obviously because..." He trailed off, incapable of coming up with a good reason.

Max clenched his fists tightly. Shit. Why did he even...

He had always wondered about the reason himself, but he could never arrive at a conclusion because thinking about it gave him headaches. He had a vague idea as to why, but he couldn't bring himself to make such a claim.

His master's icy voice pierced his ears. "I see that you're at least unable to lie and say that you love her."

An ugly feeling rose inside Max at his master's words. He glowered at the older man, his eyes burning like a fueled fire. Overwhelmed by the raging heat inside of him, Max studied his master's graceful appearance, coming back to his senses when he noticed the similarities his master shared with Jubelian.

Yeah, he... normally, he would've immediately refuted his master's remarks, but now, no matter what he said, Max couldn't get angry because this man was Jubelian's father.

When Max didn't answer, Regis filled the silence for him. "From now on, don't show up in front of my daughter ever again," he commanded.

Even so, he treated Max with such disrespect... It was annoying. Max looked irritated. Then, he adopted a rebellious look on his face, saying, "No, I don't want to."

Regis' eyes darkened. "She's already been through a lot. She's not someone you can just toy with."

Max felt himself growing fiercer. Regis thought that Max had just been toying with her?

It was true that he had ulterior motives when he had first encountered Jubelian, but things were different now.

"Oh, you're Father's disciple."

Ever since they had first met, he had gone out of his way to search for her because... because...

"It gets cold at night because we're in-between seasons."

He had never felt cold before, but he was able to experience what it meant to feel warmth for the first time because of her.

"Good night."

Max had never slept well at night because he had always been anxious about getting ambushed at any moment, but he had been able to sleep peacefully in her presence.

"It's okay to be honest with me."

He always had to show off his strength because he feared that others would look down on him, but when he was by her side, he didn't have to.

"I was worried because I have strange tastes, but I'm glad you like it as well."

When he was with her, he could put up with the things he disliked.

"I'm still in a situation where I'm being ignored by those in high society. How much of a joke will they think I am if you disrespected me as well?"

He hated lowering himself for someone else, but if it was for her, he didn't mind, no matter how many times it took.

"If you're that against it, then I guess it can't be helped. Let's end our contract here."

He was afraid that she would leave if he didn't agree to the things she said.

"Max?"

Max's world had always been achromatic. Everything was either white, black, or gray. The only color he knew was red, which carried with it the stench of blood. One day, however, his desolate world had suddenly found itself rife with new shades: blue, purple, and a dazzlingly beautiful silver.

Although the vague answer he was looking for almost came to mind, he couldn't be sure about it. Nonetheless, Max was positive that he had no choice but to admit that he could no longer imagine a world without Jubelian.

Max looked straight into his master's eyes and opened his mouth. "Don't assume my feelings without my permission," he said. He then stood up and walked past his master. "I have no intention of breaking up with her." He began to walk away slowly. Then, he paused. "That's all I have to say," he declared.

He recalled Jubelian's face when she had left the drawing room. She was

definitely smiling, but it was strangely different from her usual smile. It wasn't as bright. Wanting to see her as soon as possible, Max quickened his pace and left the room.

Regis gazed at the door his disciple had left through with confusion. There was... no way. Although he denied his thoughts, he had definitely seen an unfamiliar expression on his disciple's face. Yes, it was a warm expression he thought he would never see Max make.

The moment he admitted this fact, he felt greatly fatigued. Regis covered his face with his hands without realizing it. Then, he shut his eyes tight.



The two of them must've made up by now, right? I wondered about them as I opened up a book. Strangely enough, however, I couldn't focus on reading. Oh, what was wrong with me? I silently groaned.

Suddenly, I heard a knocking sound at my window and I flinched. Was it Max? But he had no reason to come this way...

Just to make sure, I approached my window to check.

There, I was surprised by a black shadow upon the balcony. Gosh. Why did this guy have to come this way when my room had a perfectly fine door? I sighed as I undid the latch. As soon as I opened the window, the chilly wind from outside made the curtains flutter lightly.

I locked eyes with Max. His gaze looked deeper than usual.

"Why did you come this way?" I asked. "You could've used the stairs."

"What took you so long? It's cold," he said, making an irrelevant remark instead of answering my question.

Well, it wasn't like this was the first time he had done something I couldn't understand... I suppose I was stupid for even asking him. I tried to close the window after letting him in the room, but he placed his hands over mine. "I'll do it for you," he said.

Did he finally mature? He had never listened to me before...

“Well, all I have to do is pull,” I said, but he still didn’t let go. Noticing that his temperature felt a little feverish, I turned around and saw that his face was a little redder than usual. “Are you okay? I think you have a slight fever...”

He gazed at me for a while, then answered me in a soft voice. “I don’t know.”

I took his hands off of mine and hurriedly closed the window. “I’ll tell the maid to call our doctor,” I said. I was about to pass him by when he carefully wrapped his hands around mine once more.

“Don’t go,” he said gently. Being watched by such a serious expression made me feel strange since it differed so much from the ones he usually wore. “It’s nothing. My temperature usually runs high.”

I frowned. Why was he joking about something like that?

Then, I noticed that he was smiling at me. I couldn’t look away from his handsome face at first, but then I was soon able to come back to my senses. “Why are you smiling?” I asked reproachfully.

“Because I feel like I know why now,” he promptly replied.

Know why about what? Curious, I stared at him blankly.

“Let’s sit down first,” he said. Then, he led me to the couch as naturally as if this was his own room.

“My spot is...” Since he usually occupied the spacious couch alone, I tried moving to the armchair across the room, but he didn’t let go of my hand.

“Sit here,” he ordered.

“What?”

“You’ve always looked at this couch like you wanted to sit here.”

I was amazed since I didn’t expect the man who never gave up his spot to say such a thing.

“Wait a minute, what happened?” I asked. “Did something happen with Father?” I was indirectly asking if he had finally become a normally functioning human after discussing things with Father.

He stared at me for a second before opening his mouth. “Master is starting to doubt.”

I was startled. “Doubt? Doubt what?”

“He is doubting... our relationship.” He answered slowly.

I was shocked by his unhurried claim since I had been so nice to him today. I had even acted coy... but Father was still doubting us?

“It was probably because you’ve been the only one initiating any acting,” he continued with a frown.

I was the only one? I narrowed my eyes, but otherwise remained silent since it was true to some extent. I had been too nervous to give him the chance to provide his own input.

“I thought about what we could do and came to the conclusion that we need to get to know each other better.”

That made sense because I didn’t know anything about him to start with. “Alright!” I agreed. “Then, what should we—”

“Take a seat first. Then we’ll talk.” He tapped the spot next to him.

When I awkwardly sat down, I could feel all of his attention focused onto me. His gaze, which was different than usual, made me feel strange. How should I put this... it was a little uncomfortable.

The more I thought about it, however, the more I started to realize that this feeling probably originated from my own victim mentality. Judging from his unconcerned behavior, he was probably looking at me without much thought. If I tried to avoid his gaze, he could get offended.

I watched him sedately. “So, what do you want to know about each other?”

“Well, what do you like?” he asked, his voice pitched lower.

I tried to think about it. What did I like? It just occurred to me that I had lived so far without even considering if I had any preferences. In my past life, I had spent all my time trying to get a job, and in this life, I had spent all my time chasing after Mikhail. I was starting to feel remorseful, wondering why I didn’t even know where my preferences lied and why I hadn’t tried living for myself

until now.

Amidst my silent contemplation, Max spoke up. "I like swords," he said.

As soon as I processed his words, I became somewhat disheartened. I couldn't believe that he could spit something out so easily while I was still seriously thinking over the problem.

Well, come to think of it, it was rather simple. I let out a hollow laugh. My favorite things? It was a difficult question at first, but now I realized that it was no longer as worrisome as I had initially assumed.

"Well, I guess I like books for now," I supplied.

"Books? Is there anything else?"

"I also like looking at flowers. As well as drinking tea."

"And?"

"And relaxing while lying down..." I talked about this and that, before suddenly wondering what else he liked. "Besides swords, is there anything else?"

"Well..." he stared at me as he trailed off.

He had been staring at me for quite a while now. Honestly, he was lucky that it was me he was staring at because if it had been someone else, they would've easily misunderstood him. Was there really nothing else he liked besides swords? If this was true, I was beginning to feel sorry for him.

"If you think about it carefully, then you should be able to come up with something else that you like," I said. "You can tell me even if it's something trivial, so don't feel pressured."

After hearing what I said, he slowly reached toward me. I watched his long fingers gradually near my face. What was he trying to do? When I looked into his eyes, I could see them shaking weakly. He looked confused. Instead of stopping him, I decided to wait and see what would happen.

"I'm not sure yet," he spoke in a strange tone, brushing some hair from my face.

I watched him slowly pull his hand away from me. “Why didn’t you tell me that I had hair there?” I asked.

“Couldn’t I be the one to remove it?” He frowned slightly.

“Ah, well... sure.” It was true that we were in a contractual relationship. He was probably practicing so he would be ready for when we needed to perform in front of others. I understood his motivations.

“You know... you don’t have to put up an act when we’re alone,” I said, just in case he was bothered by having to do it. He didn’t reply.

Seriously, he didn’t even realize when I was being considerate toward him. I grumbled quietly, but then I remembered something I had forgotten about.

“Oh, come to think of it, did you make up with Father?”

He shook his head at my question.

Wait, they still hadn’t patched things up between them? The two of them seemed so motivated to have a conversation earlier, but they must’ve ended up drinking tea in silence again. I sighed in frustration. Would I need to continue doing this despite Father’s objections after all? As expected, nothing in life was easy.

“Why are you making that face?” Max asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just frustrated.”

“About what?”

I debated over whether or not I should answer him honestly. It was up to him to decide whether or not he wanted to reconcile with Father. He could get offended if I spoke to him honestly.

I tried to read his face before saying something vague. “I think Father still hasn’t given up on marrying me off to the crown prince.”

Max narrowed his eyes slightly. “Do you hate the crown prince that much?”

“Huh?” I was taken aback by the question. It felt rather sudden, and he was watching me with a serious look on his face.

Did I have to tell him what was truly on my mind? I sighed, coming to the

decision that I didn't have to tell him about these things, after all.

"You know... all you have to do is help me avoid getting engaged to the crown prince. So..."

He suddenly began fiercely glaring at me. Normally, I would've continued without hesitation, but the sudden change in his expression made me pause mid-sentence.

"Why are you trying to avoid your engagement to the crown prince?" he asked, his voice low.

I clenched my fists. His interruption had made me forget what I was originally going to say. *Because he's a psychopath who's supposed to kill me in the future!* I almost cried. Others might be afraid of him, but that was the full extent of their worries. I, on the other hand, had to endure knowing he could be the cause of my own death.

I was sure that my life was going to end the moment we met.

"Be honest," he insisted. "I'm just asking what you dislike about him."

He had a valid point. He may have been an extra at the beginning of the novel, but now he was involved with me, the villainess. Even so, I couldn't tell him the truth and he probably wouldn't believe me if I did. Therefore, I ended up telling him only part of it.

"He's scary. I heard he even kills his own people if he doesn't like them," I said.

He gazed at me with trembling eyes. He looked shocked by what I said, and I began to worry as the color drained from his face, his skin blanching as pale as wax.

Was he okay? I thought about shaking his shoulders to snap him back to normal, but then he knitted his eyebrows together. I hadn't done anything yet.

As if to put my thoughts to shame, he glared at me resentfully. "Scary? But... you've never seen him before," he accused.

His sudden change in demeanor caught me off guard, but I quickly shook my head. "Dangerous animals like bears or leopards are still known to be scary

even if you've never seen them in person before. It's like that. If I meet him, then my life will be in danger."

Even though I had provided an adequate comparison, he just gave me a look of confusion in return. "Your life will be put in danger? What makes you think that?"

I suddenly realized I had been speaking about the crown prince in an exaggerated manner. "Oh, well... it's because of all of those vulgar rumors..."

Max's expression hardened at my words and he let out a sigh. "If he promises not to kill you, will you marry him?"

I frowned slightly. Who was he to say that the crown prince would make such a promise? It flustered me, but I decided not to think too deeply about it since I was only talking to Max. He said weird things on a regular basis. This was probably just a joke, and to be sociable, one had to be able to respond appropriately to jokes. Although I had no intention of getting married, I went along with him since he was just teasing me.

"Well, if he tells me that he won't kill me, I might think about it," I said.

His face brightened. He must've thought his joke had worked on me. My face darkened at the nonsense that came out of him next, though.

"You never know. Marrying the crown prince may not be as bad as you think."

I frowned. He really had no sense of humor. "I don't like these kinds of jokes," I said firmly.

His face twisted into a frown again.



"Welcome back. How was your day?" Fresia asked Max after he returned to his residence.

When he looked back at her, Fresia stiffened, noticing her lord's somewhat gloomy aura.

Did something happen? Many potential concerns crossed her mind, such as Max getting into an argument with Duke Floyen or something bad happening to Lady Floyen.

She watched Max with worrisome eyes. Then, he spoke. "I have something to ask, Fresia."

She swallowed nervously at his dispirited tone. "Please, feel free to ask me anything," she assured him.

He sighed. "Am I something to fear amongst the people? For example... like a bear or a leopard?"

Fresia shook her head at his words.

That was what he thought. He had never killed someone aimlessly before... Jubelian was the strange one for being afraid of him, he thought.

Then, he heard Fresia's firm voice elaborate on her answer. "No, I assure you that you're much scarier than those things," she said.

Max scowled. So that was what the people thought of him. As he cursed others for their disgraceful treatment of him, he recalled the words Jubelian had said to him.

"He's scary," she had said. "I heard he even kills his own people if he doesn't like them."

Max furrowed his brows, frustrated. He just needed to let her know that he wasn't going to harm her... even though it was obvious he had no intention of doing so, there was still a chance that Jubelian would run off as soon as he confessed to her that he was the crown prince. He tried to figure out a way to convey his feelings, thoroughly exasperated.

Watching Max struggle, Fresia guessed why he seemed so distressed. "Are you upset about Lady Floyen? Could it be that... you're struggling to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her?"

Max flinched and glared at her. "How did you know?"

It was obvious. Fresia sighed. While running the salon, she had overheard a lot of people's troubles. Among them, the most common problems seemed to

be about romance. When it came to love, the wisest of ladies, the most renowned scholar, and even the best, most experienced politician became a fool.

She should probably help him.

Fresia decided to use her experience to give Max some advice. “Why don’t you try writing her a letter?”

“A letter?”

“Yes, there’s nothing better than using a letter to convey your thoughts.”

Max fell deep into thought at Fresia’s words. Then, he opened his mouth. “Write to the emperor and tell him that I’ll return soon.”

“Huh? All of a sudden?” Fresia asked, confused. Why did he pick the emperor to send a letter to instead of Lady Floyen? Why on earth did he change his mind?

Despite the emperor’s urging, her lord had postponed returning to the palace until now. She couldn’t wrap her head around why Max had suddenly decided to return like this out of the blue. Was he perhaps planning to start putting pressure on the emperor and empress? Although many preparations had been made for the uprising, it was still too early to reveal any hints.

This was a big deal... based on His Highness’ personality, he might not stop there. She needed to give him some serious warnings before he returned to the palace.

Contrary to his subordinate’s intricate planning, Max’s decision to return was born from something extremely simple: if he wrote Jubelian a letter in the name of the crown prince letting her know that he wasn’t a scary person, she would be relieved. For this to work, people would need to know that the crown prince had returned to the palace.

There was no way Fresia could’ve guessed this.



The stars disappeared one by one as the dim sky slowly turned lavender. Regis was sitting in front of his desk in his office.

He was beginning to feel uneasy these days. His daughter had become unexpectedly lively and his disciple's behavior was changing. From dawn to dusk, Regis couldn't help but agonize over what to do about these unforeseen events.

That was right. He had already made his decision. He just didn't have the courage to put it into action until now.

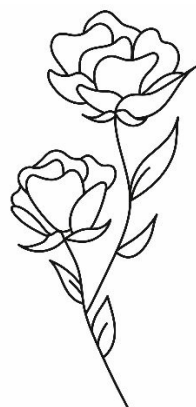
Regis closed his eyes firmly as fatigue began to overwhelm him. When he thought of his lovely daughter, however, he slowly opened them again.

She could come to hate him.

Regis smiled bitterly as he gradually stood up.

Derrick gazed upon the duke with troubled eyes. The duke didn't sleep at all last night... would he be okay?

"Get me ready to enter the imperial palace," the duke ordered.



Ominous Presence

As mentioned in the novel, I saw a terrifying man covered from head to toe in black armor. I watched in silence as sanguine blood trickled down the blade of the sword he held. If I tried to run away, I knew I would be nothing more than a game of chase for him. I slowly closed my eyes as he approached me, praying that he would finish me off with a single stab.

All of a sudden, I started shaking violently. “Are you all right, my lady?” I heard someone ask. “You’re covered in sweat.”

I sighed in relief when I opened my eyes and saw Marilyn’s worried face looking down at me. Oh, it was just a dream. Thank goodness.



The emperor’s hands trembled as he read the crown prince’s letter. That vile rat! He was finally coming back after dragging his feet all this time, but he still wasn’t saying when he planned to return. Even though the letter listed several reasons for his delay, the emperor was still irritated since they were just excuses given by his irksome son.

He tore up the crumpled letter. “Now that one of them has sent a letter, we just have to wait for the other one,” he muttered coldly.

Suddenly, one of the servants at the door entered the office and began to whisper to the grand chamberlain. Afterwards, the grand chamberlain swiftly approached the emperor. “Your Majesty, Duke Floyen has arrived,” he mumbled softly.

“Bring him in,” the emperor ordered in a deep voice. The person he had been waiting for had arrived.

When the door to the office opened, Regis entered and bowed to the

emperor. "I greet the sun of our empire," he said.

"Welcome, Duke Floyen," the emperor greeted with a sardonic smile. "Do you know how long I've been waiting for you?"

Despite the emperor's sarcasm, Regis remained calm and responded coolly. "I apologize for not being able to come sooner. Both my mind and body have become weak these days..."

Although he was using being ill as an excuse, Regis' face remained the same as usual. The emperor raised an eyebrow disapprovingly. He didn't like what Regis was doing, but there was no time to argue with him. If it weren't for the other people present in the office, he would've lashed out at him.

"I have something to discuss with the duke so everyone else can take their leave," the emperor announced.

"I'm sorry?"

"But, Your Majesty...!"

The grand chamberlain and Count Pyrex, the head of the emperor's royal bodyguards, tried to retort, but the emperor waved his hand and shooed them away as if they were pests. Soon, the only people left in the office were him and Duke Floyen. They stared each other down.

Intending to disclose his true intentions, the emperor opened his mouth. "Did you know, Duke Floyen?"

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"About Marquis Lennox. I've recently heard that he is starting to have ulterior motives."

Regis knew Marquis Lennox. He was a commander in the south known for being an outstanding tactician, and he possessed a great love for the empire.

"Ask Lord Floyen to protect the capital. He'll buy enough time for us to go north and ask for reinforcements," he had once suggested to the emperor. Regis hadn't been particularly displeased with his decision back then since he had said it out of his loyalty for the empire, and it was true that the decision had helped to protect the capital in the end. Even so, that loyalty didn't help

Marquis Lennox win the emperor's favor because he had done something out of concern for the crown prince.

"Ulterior motives...?" Regis asked.

"I'm referring to traitorous thoughts."

Marquis Lennox having traitorous thoughts? Wasn't he the man who devoted himself to the emperor during the war? Regis' face hardened as he observed his sovereign. The emperor looked down at him.

"I hear that he had the guts to betray me by gathering a large number of soldiers behind my back."

When he heard those words, theories started to flood into Regis' head. Was it because of that? He wore a serious expression as he brooded over the news.

Then, the emperor continued, speaking in a disgruntled voice. He took Regis' silence as an affirmation. "Isn't it obvious that he's started to have ulterior motives?" he asked. "All the nonsense he used to say—including how he had told me to bring the crown prince back here and educate him for the throne—makes sense now."

Regis frowned slightly and sighed at the evidence the emperor employed. How could a man known as the empire's greatest power be so dim-witted?

Ten years ago, Marquis Lennox had begun voicing his opinion about gathering military forces at the southern border in preparation for an invasion from Lagon. However, the emperor and the nobles in the capital had dismissed his suspicions as nonsense.

"What is making you doubt his loyalty, Your Majesty?" Regis asked.

The emperor grimaced at Regis' question. Then, he gazed at Kirke's ring on his finger. "I certainly don't doubt your loyalty," he said.

Even though the emperor's words sounded assuring on the surface, Regis knew that it was a warning. He was indirectly implying that if he discovered Regis harboring any ulterior motives, then he would start pressuring him. Regis glared at the emperor as the latter fiddled with Kirke's ring.

The emperor raised his head, smiling ominously. "As long as I have this leash,

you'll always be on my side."

The moment he heard the word *leash*, Regis felt a fire begin to burn in the pit of his stomach. He calmed his anger, however, because it wasn't the right time yet. Instead of keeping his glare trained on the emperor, Regis lowered his eyes deferentially. Mistaking the change in Regis' expression as a sign of his intimidation, the emperor gave a boisterous chuckle.

"Unfortunately, I only have one leash. So, there's no guarantee that others will be quite as loyal."

Regis knew what the emperor was trying to say and fought off the queasy feeling settling in his gut. The emperor was trying to provoke him. Whatever the truth behind Maquis Lennox's actions may have been, Regis had no intention of helping him as he was the commander who had cold-heartedly left him behind.

However, Regis hesitated for another reason. It would certainly take a long time to reach Marquis Lennox in the south.

The trip to the south and back could take about six months, so there was a possibility that he might not return in time for his daughter's coming-of-age ceremony. Moreover, it was clear that the emperor would take advantage of Regis' absence to place Jubelian under his surveillance, given his petty nature.

There wasn't much time left... Regis clenched his fists, unable to suppress the growing rage he felt. At that moment, the emperor smiled slyly and swept at the ring he wore. Another warning.

Did he think Regis was afraid of such a thing? What a fool. Regis' eyes froze over, his stare turning as cold as ice. From his seat on the throne, however, the emperor could only see Regis' lowered head. He was oblivious to his subject's thoughts.

I'll make sure to tear you into pieces and kill you, Regis silently promised.

The emperor wore a patronizing smile. "So, you're going to have to—"

All of a sudden, the door to the office creaked loudly, swinging violently open.

"Y-you can't do this...!" the grand chamberlain cried, but the uninvited guest was unyielding.

“Get lost.”

His petrifying voice made the grand chamberlain’s blood run cold, so he stepped back in fear. The situation was more than enough of a reason for the emperor to call on the head of the royal guards, but the emperor only tensed, observing the intruder as he strode closer. The man wore a menacing set of black armor similar to what a skeleton knight might wear.

The emperor knew of only one person who would come in wearing such a thing. “You rat!” he cried. “How did you...?!”

The intruder removed his helmet, keeping his eyes trained on the astonished, sputtering emperor. His handsome face was soon revealed. He met the emperor’s gaze with a crimson stare.

“Long time no see,” he greeted.

The emperor’s face crumpled roughly. “Maximillian,” he murmured. Although he had uttered his son’s name, his voice carried no affection. “The letter you sent arrived this morning. How did you get here so early?”

The emperor’s tone was a cautionary one, but Max remained calm. “I left right after sending the letter,” he said.

“Do you think that’s normal—”

“Isn’t it better than being late?” he interrupted. He spoke with a deep, harsh voice as if to intimidate his father, his fierce eyes resembling that of a beast’s.

The emperor assumed his son would be as obedient as he was a few years ago, so this display stupefied him. This was a mistake on his part. He only called his son back to keep the duke in check, but he didn’t expect the brat to grow into such a brutal person. Although he appeared calm on the outside, the emperor was actually terrified by his son’s attitude. He feared that his son might bare his teeth and attack him.

The emperor swallowed dryly, his voice meek. “Still, people usually visit later to give the other party some time to prepare... arriving so soon is considered bad etiquette,” he said.

Max grinned cynically. The emperor must’ve been knocked down a peg since

the last time they had met. He couldn't believe a man like this was his father. Whether he intended to hide his feelings or not, Max's eyes conveyed their clear contempt.

"Wouldn't it be better to visit you sooner rather than later if I was planning on doing so anyway, Father?"

Pressured by his son's menacing spirit, the emperor stiffened for a moment. "I-I can wait a day or two!" he hurriedly answered.

"Alright. I'll keep that in mind from now on."

As if he were satisfied with his son's marginally softer answer, the emperor relaxed slightly. "You can leave for now," he said. "I still have some things to discuss with Duke Floyen."

Max whipped his head around in surprise. His master was here?

He confirmed the identity of the man facing the emperor. Then, he scrunched his nose harshly. Of all people...

Now that his master had seen him, he wasn't sure what was going to happen if he tried sending an official letter as the crown prince. In addition, his master was definitely going to use any means possible to prevent any secret correspondence.

Max glowered at the duke in discontentment before turning back to his father. "What have you been discussing with him?"

Under Max's gaze, the emperor inhaled sharply. His eyes were so frightening that it made him forget all about Marquis Lennox at the southern border.

What if this guy tried something while the duke was away in the south...? He tried to dismiss the thought, but his mind kept coming up with horrifying speculations. The emperor gaped at his son in fear.

Then, Duke Floyen spoke. "Your Highness, I am currently receiving confidential orders from His Majesty," he said. "For now, I'd like for you to leave this place."

At the duke's words, the emperor felt like he could breathe again. "Yeah, get out of here!" he wanted to say, but he kept quiet.

However, there was no way that this insane prince was going to listen to him. “Are you ordering the crown prince around, Duke Floyen?” Max’s eyes were wrought with spite as he stared the duke down. Instead of backing down, however, the duke retaliated with his own warlike spirit.

“Then let me ask you this: are you defying an imperial order right now, Your Highness?”

When Regis brought this up, Max glared at the emperor. The emperor’s breath hitched in his throat as he fought desperately to avoid that gaze.

“I’ll see you later then, Father,” the prince said.

The emperor looked at Duke Floyen as his son turned away, leaving the office. Yes. Since Maximillian wasn’t going to listen to him, it would be best to leave these two to fight against each other for now.

The emperor kept his gaze determinedly locked on Duke Floyen. “Continue protecting the capital for my sake,” he ordered.

Regis smirked as he bowed. He wasn’t expecting this, but thanks to Max’s sudden appearance, everything worked out for him.



A woman’s sharp voice rang throughout the gaudy room decorated in gold. “What? The crown prince is back?”

“Yes. He had just returned, and he had an audience with the emperor.”

“What was the emperor’s reaction to this?”

“Ah, well... he’s still talking to Duke Floyen...”

The luxuriously-clad woman nervously bit at her nails. Maximillian... she couldn’t believe he had already returned to the capital. Her eyes shook nervously as she turned her gaze to the man lying stretched out before her.

“What has the spy been doing, letting things turn out like this?”

Her subordinate sighed and shook his head. “It’s been a week since we’ve lost

contact with him, and the prince decided to return without any prior notice...”

The woman’s beautiful face twisted into a grimace as she raised her voice. “How could you handle matters like this!” she shouted. “You’re all useless!”

At her outburst, a calm voice called out to her. “Calm down, Mother.”

The woman’s expression softened slightly when she realized who the voice belonged to. Although the girl was still young, she possessed immense beauty and a captivating aura. Looking at her tall, slender, and curvaceous body made the woman feel as if she was gazing into a mirror. Nevertheless, it is said that lions raise their young by pushing them over a cliff.

The empress gave her daughter a stern look. “Beatrice, I’ve clearly told you what you should do before you enter this—”

“Yes,” the girl interrupted with a sweet smile. “You told me to knock.”

The woman sighed. “You’ve got a bad habit of interrupting your mother as she speaks.”

Beatrice gave her mother a slight smile. “I only want you to stay healthy and well, Mother.”

“I can’t be well now that an eyesore has returned.”

Beatrice grinned. “I should go welcome my brother now that he has returned,” she said. Her relaxed gaze turned sharp as she continued. “So that no one else can welcome him.”



After the havoc that Max caused, the emperor maintained a submissive attitude.

Regis knew he wouldn’t have to care about the emperor for a while now, so he left the office with a light heart. Then, a voice suddenly called out to him.

“Duke Floyen.”

His disciple, still clad in his iconic jet-black armor, had returned to being the

crown prince. "It's been a long time," he said, his voice hostile. "You still look well."

At his polite tone, the servants surrounding the prince froze in shock. However, Regis quickly saw through Max. A corner of his lips quirked up in a wry smirk. Judging from how despicable Max was being at the moment, he must've had something to tell him.

Regis silently observed Max for a moment. Then, he replied, "Long time no see. Have you been well, Your Highness?"

"Yes, thanks to you. I'd like to talk to you about matters regarding palace security for a moment. Will that be okay?"

Max had his face covered with his helmet again, but even with his face concealed, Regis could tell what he was thinking. He knew Max was only using palace security as an excuse to try and provoke him.

Despite that knowledge, Regis willingly complied with his disciple's prodding. "Of course, Your Highness," he acquiesced.



Arriving in the dining room, I noticed that my seat had been the only one prepared.

"Hello, Lady Floyen," a servant greeted me.

I guess Father wasn't here today. Recently, it felt like he had been staying home more, but it seemed that arrangement had only lasted for a short time. Well, this was how it usually was.

I sat down at the table to eat. As I slowly looked over everything, I noticed that there was less salad dressing present than usual. I should ask for more dressing. I glanced at the servant next to the table and parted my lips to say something, but before I could get a single word out, the servant smiled and spoke gently.

"Master is away because he had an important matter to attend to early in the morning," the servant explained.

What? Why was he suddenly talking about Father?

“Uh... okay,” I responded, feeling a bit awkward. The situation struck me as a bit absurd, so I forgot what I was going to say. I kept my mouth shut for a moment as I tried to remember. Then, I opened it back up once I regained my train of thought. “Could you get me some more salad dressing please?”

At that moment, the servant’s eyes shook slightly. “Master promised to be back before dinner, so don’t worry,” he assured me.

No, but... that wasn’t what I asked for. I wanted some dressing.

I wanted to voice my thoughts aloud, but as soon as I saw the sorrowful look in the servant’s eyes, I couldn’t. Instead, I nodded in reply and forced a smile.



Max removed his helmet when it was only him and the duke left in the room. Regis silently watched Max, stirring his tea with a teaspoon.

Then, he broke the silence.

“What did you want to discuss, Your Highness?”

At a glance, it seemed as if he was lowering his guard, but the truth was that he didn’t want Max to find fault with him.

Max recalled what his master had said in the past: “The imperial palace shall not know of our relationship as master and disciple.”

Even though it was just the two of them here, he still refused to let his guard down. Max sighed softly. He glared quietly at his master, inspecting him, but his master had no weak points to attack. His strategy was to pressure him after finding one, but seeing that such a strategy wouldn’t work on this opponent, he decided to convey his thoughts directly.

“What did you discuss with Father?” he asked.

Unchanging in expression, his master elegantly lifted his teacup. “I’m pretty sure I mentioned that it was a confidential order earlier,” he commented. Regis

appeared somewhat villainous as he responded indifferently. Emotionlessly.

He had no intention of telling Max, so Max narrowed his eyes. He would just have to find out for himself.

“The imperial palace has been diligent about upping its security lately,” he said. “I heard an assassin attacked during my absence.”

It was obvious why the prince was now mentioning the very same assassination attempt that he had planned and instigated. He was wondering if the emperor had discovered who the mastermind behind the whole thing was. Regis knew the answer his disciple wanted to hear, but he had no intention of giving it to him.

“I don’t think it’s a matter you should be concerned about, Your Highness. All I can tell you is that the mastermind has not been revealed as of yet.”

In other words, Regis was saying that he would overlook what Max had done to avoid causing a dispute about it in the future. Max stared at his master for a moment, then smirked.

“How can I be of use to Father if I’m not informed about the matters he’s involved in?” he challenged.

“His Majesty has ordered me to remain silent on this matter. If things go wrong, both you and I will be charged with insubordination.”

Even though Max tried to use his status as the crown prince to his advantage, his master used the emperor’s status in retaliation, aiming to intimidate him.

Ah, how annoying. When they were working together, Max didn’t think much about his master, but now that a conflict existed between them, the man was quite a nuisance. He was aggravating. It was vexing how Regis was acting polite yet getting on his nerves about everything at the same time. Max didn’t have the capability to use force on him or the means to justify doing so, either.

Most importantly, Max was worried about sending a letter to Jubelian since it was clear as day that his master was going to be an obstacle. If Max tried to send a letter, Regis would definitely do something to interfere. Under these circumstances, it would be risky to send something official. Anger surged inside him, but Max couldn’t openly express his distaste to his master, so all he could

do was glare.

“Then I guess we have nothing else to discuss,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “You can leave for now.”

His master gave him a cynical smile at his dismissal. “Rest comfortably, Your Highness.”

Facial expressions played a large part in psychological warfare. Perhaps that was why the term *poker face* existed. Max was aware that he was lacking in experience in every other aspect when compared to his master, but he was uncannily furious nevertheless. It felt as if he had given his master a reason to oppose him, allowing him to say, “I can’t give my daughter to a man like you.”

Fury flashed through him as he watched Regis leave the room. As soon as the door closed behind the duke, he hurled his teacup into the wall.

It didn’t break, however.

“I have safely protected this expensive, precious teacup worth as much as gold,” a man with black hair sang, twirling the teacup around in his hand. Given Max’s distress, however, it was impossible for him to register the man’s trivial joke.

Max disregarded his subordinate and picked up the letter that he had left on his desk. As long as he managed to deliver this letter...

Max rose to his feet. Then, he took off his armor and changed into something more comfortable.

“Where are you going?” the man asked.

“I’m going to ask Fresia for advice.”

When Max mentioned Fresia, the man opened his mouth, a grin dawning upon his playful face. “If you need advice, I’m confident that I could do a good job.”

Max stared at the man, his expression rather serious. “Victor,” he said.

The man stiffened at the sound of his name, straightening into something sterner. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Max tossed his helmet to the man. "If you get caught, I'll kill you," he warned coldly.

The man had readied himself to give the crown prince some advice, but was instead tasked with wearing his armor again. He sighed softly, a bit disappointed. Of course.

However, he didn't know what his murderous lord would do to him if he complained about this role, so Victor bowed politely in return. "I'll keep that in mind. Have a safe trip."

When the crown prince disappeared from sight, he glowered at the helmet and cursed. "This goddamn armor," he groaned. "I want to throw it in a furnace."

"Victor."

Victor inhaled sharply, realizing that his brutal prince had returned to the room and was now staring at him with fierce eyes.

"O-oh no, Your Highness. That's not what I meant... I was just talking about how majestic the armor looks!" He quickly tried to cover for himself, but the prince's expression showed no sign of easing up. Thinking that he was as good as dead, Victor prayed for his soul to rest peacefully.

"What are... some ways that I can send a letter to someone without getting caught by the master of the house?" Max suddenly asked.

At the unexpected question, Victor's fear melted into bewilderment. He looked dumbfounded. "Huh? Why are you asking me something like that?"

Max scowled at him. "You know, now that I think about it, I've heard that you're known as quite the womanizer amongst those in the army," he commented bitterly.

Victor frowned. It was true that he often changed lovers, but he swore he had never cheated on anyone. A womanizer? That was a bit too harsh. The only thing he really had a lot of experience in was dating.

Victor grumbled under his breath for suddenly having been labeled an insult, before flinching when the crown prince spoke up again.

“So, stop acting like you don’t know and tell me how to send a secret letter to a hidden lover.”

Victor lowered his head at the sharp gaze coming from the prince’s terrifying eyes.



With a white pigeon in his arms, Max stood absentmindedly near the huge tree next to Duke Floyen’s mansion.

“I usually send a carrier pigeon,” Victor had said. “After all, people don’t really go as far as to monitor the sky these days.”

Max gazed at the carrier pigeon he trained as he recalled Victor’s advice. His letter was firmly tied to the pigeon’s thin leg.

Alright. Upon reading this, she should be relieved. When that happened... he speculated about what was going to happen for a moment, then stared at the carrier pigeon with determination. As if it felt threatened, the pigeon cooed pitifully.

“If you end up flying to the wrong place, I’ll kill you. So, make sure you do a good job,” Max grumbled before releasing the carrier pigeon.

For the sake of its survival, the pigeon headed straight to the balcony of Jubelian’s room.



It was the day before the tea party. After making sure I had prepared everything I needed, I spent my time lazing around in my room. I was tired. I definitely wasn’t cut out for social events.

At that moment, I heard a tapping sound coming from my window. Did Max visit through the window again? That was highly likely, so I sat up and walked

over to inspect the sound. Just as I was about to mindlessly open the window, I stiffened when I heard a flapping sound.

What was that? With trembling eyes, I peeked out the window and saw something I didn't expect to see. I carefully studied the thing in order to identify it before I felt my blood run cold. Why would a pigeon be here?

Perhaps it was because I had just witnessed something so horrifically terrifying, but I discovered that I couldn't even scream. Goosebumps peppered my arms then rapidly spread throughout my entire body.

In my past life, I worked part-time at a convenience store, and a pigeon had flown in one day, tearing everything apart. I tried to kick it out by shooing it away with a broom, but the little guy fluttered around the store, shedding feathers and shitting everywhere. The pigeon eventually left after a customer drove it away, but by then, I had already been traumatized.

"U-Uhh..." I crumpled to the ground, unable to scream. I felt suffocated as the pigeon stared at me through the thin window. As if it were threatening me, the little guy pecked at the window with its orange beak.

The window wasn't going to break, was it? The worst-case scenario dominated my thoughts.

Then, I heard the door open.

"My lady! Oh my goodness!" Marilyn cried. "What are you—"

I shakily raised my hand and pointed at the window. "M-Marilyn! P-Please get that pigeon away from there!" I begged.

She had appeared just in time. At my request, Marilyn adopted a fierce look that didn't suit her and approached the window. "You accursed bird!" she shouted. "Go! Go away at once!"

I was startled by her vicious behavior. Then, I felt my lungs kick back into gear once I spotted the pigeon flying away. I survived. Thank God.

Maybe it was because I was overcome by relief, but I suddenly remembered the nightmare I had last night. Did I have that nightmare because of this? I was taking a few deep breaths to calm myself when Marilyn next spoke.

“Oh, that pigeon looks like a carrier pigeon, my lady. It has something tied to its leg,” she said.

I narrowed my eyes. A carrier pigeon? Carrier pigeons were typically used to secretly send letters one wished to keep private and separate from the outside world. I pondered over a number of individuals who might send me something in such a way before concluding that it had to be one of the many people who wanted to threaten me.

Yeah. It must’ve been sent to scare me. I was absolutely certain of that conclusion.

“Could it be... a love letter from someone who has feelings for you, my lady?” Marilyn asked.

I blanched at her supposition. “There’s no way,” I said. “It would make more sense if it were sent by someone who disliked me.”

“I’m sorry?” Marilyn questioned. She looked like I had just uttered something that sounded ridiculous. However, I trusted my instincts and decided that this letter must’ve come from a terrorist who held some animosity against me.

“I want you to... do something to make sure that that bird never comes near this area ever again.”

“Yes, my lady. I’ll deliver your request to Madam Perez,” Marilyn answered, sighing deeply.

I watched as she headed out the door. Then, I sighed as well. Nothing was going to happen at the tea party tomorrow, right?



Max was at his residence in Salon Blooms. He frowned as he inspected the carrier pigeon that had returned to him because the letter was still intact.

He definitely saw it land on Jubelian’s windowsill. Max clenched his fists as he mulled over if his master had already done something to interfere with his plan. If this carrier pigeon wouldn’t work, he would have to find another way...

At that moment, Fresia opened the door and entered his room. “Oh, Your Highness! Aren’t you supposed to be at the imperial palace?” She paused. “Um, what’s with the carrier pigeon and that letter? Isn’t that your seal?”

“It’s something I tried to send to Jubelian, but I failed.”

Fresia sighed at that. “You’re extremely fortunate that it failed.”

“What?”

The crown prince had answered dejectedly and absentmindedly, so Fresia raised her voice. “I mean, the lady doesn’t even know about Your Highness’ true identity! Wouldn’t it be strange for her to suddenly receive a letter from the crown prince when she had never even met him?”

Only then had Max understood what she meant. He furrowed his brows. “I see,” he murmured.

Releasing another sigh, Fresia continued. “If you wish to get close to the lady as the crown prince, you should first come up with an opportunity to meet her.”

“An opportunity...” Max echoed under his breath.

“Also, now that you’ve officially returned to the capital, please stay alert from now on. If Your Highness is found to be absent from the room—”

“Victor is standing in for me.”

“Oh. He must be wearing that armor again,” Fresia mumbled weakly, expressing her sorrow for Victor.

“It’s made of the finest amantarium, so it shouldn’t be too uncomfortable.”

That wasn’t what she meant... Fresia sighed at how her lord had completely missed her point.

“Has there been any new information from the imperial palace?” Max suddenly asked.

Fresia’s expression hardened. “The empress has been fabricating groundless rumors and spreading them,” she reported.

“Groundless rumors?”

She averted her gaze and tried to change the topic. “Well, there’s no other

information that you should be concerned about other than that... oh!" She snapped her fingers as if she had just remembered something. "Now that I think about it, there's some information saying that Marquis Lennox has been gathering more soldiers for his army."

Max's forehead wrinkled at the news. "That's not information I shouldn't be concerned about," he stated.

"I'm sorry."

Max glared at Fresia for a moment. Then, he began stroking his jaw as he mumbled to himself. "That man had never failed to voice how about gaining a larger army..." He trailed off. Suddenly, his eyes lit up. "Does that mean that there's been suspicious activity from Lagon?"

"The spy living in Lagon's territory said he didn't see any sign of such things, though. He only mentioned how the plundering of food had been worse around the base lately, but that was it."

"Have they figured out what the stolen food was for?"

"I was told it was to prepare for a famine. They've been drying precious non-grain products such as fruits and meat for storage."

Max smirked. "Preparations for a famine, huh? That's a pretty good excuse to collect provisions."

Fresia's eyes grew wide at the word *provisions*. Ah. Was that how they had been tricking everyone?

"Contact Marquis Lennox for a secret rendezvous," Max ordered.

"But the emperor currently views Marquis Lennox in a negative light..."

"Yes. And if something were to go wrong, it might seem like a rebellion."

She raised her voice at his stark remark. "That's too reckless. This could be dangerous, you know!"

"It's dangerous, but it can't be helped."

Speculating that the foolish emperor must've been thinking about launching an attack on the southern border, Max pondered over his course of action.

What if he assisted Marquis Lennox before then and led the war against Lagon to victory?

It wasn't long before he came to a decision.

"If we succeed, not only will the southern forces be on my side, but the rest of the empire will support me as well," he said.



The day of the tea party had finally arrived. After finishing the preparations, I looked over the teaware and snacks that were going to be present at the party. I had prepared a three-tier tray filled with small sandwiches, cookies, and cupcakes decorated with flowers. I had also picked out a tea set based on what noblewomen my age would enjoy.

Alright. This should be good enough.

At that moment, Marilyn called out to me. "The guests have arrived, my lady."

Upon her announcement, I started making my way to the porch. When I reached the door, I saw a group of familiar faces. Among those faces was Lady Terrence.

Ah, I didn't expect her to come.

When we made eye contact, she greeted me with a slight curtsy. "Thank you for the invitation," she said. Despite what had happened between us last we met, she looked fairly calm. Why?

Before I could come up with an answer, all the other ladies followed suit and greeted me in turn. I acknowledged their greetings with a nod before noticing that a certain person had yet to arrive.

That reminded me, was Max... not coming today? I had asked if he was available just in case he wanted to attend, but he was currently nowhere to be seen.

Well, it wasn't like we were actually dating... I understood if he wasn't able to be here. This was the first party I was hosting, too. I didn't want it to be grand, but I also didn't want to make any mistakes and encourage others to find fault with me.

"Thank you all for accepting my invitation," I said. Normally, it was customary for the master of the household to greet the guests, but since this was only an informal tea party, I hadn't told Father about it. I was positive that he was just going to view it as something bothersome, after all.

I guess the butler would have reported to him about this... but it wasn't like he had much reason to care, either.

Therefore, I greeted the guests alone. However, I could see that everyone had a strange expression on their face for some reason. Huh? Why were they making those faces?

Just when I had just noticed that something was off, I heard a voice resound from behind me.

"Welcome."

Startled, I turned around to witness my handsome father decked a ceremonial suit.

Why was Father here? Before I could answer my own question, multiple voices rang throughout the porch.

"We greet Duke Floyen, the great hero of our empire," the noblewomen greeted, politely bowing to Father in respect.

The duke was treated with a kind of reverence on par with how one would regard a king of a foreign country, and it was customary not to raise one's head until such a person allowed it. Despite that, I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable seeing my guests with their heads brought down.

I guess it couldn't be helped, given that this was a hierarchical society. I tried to accept things as they were.

"You may raise your heads," Father said.

The women lifted their heads in unison at the unexpected permission they

were given. Even though Father was on the receiving end of several hopeful gazes that an ordinary person would usually find burdensome, he managed to speak in a way that sounded earnest.

“There’s no need to be so formal, seeing as you’ve all visiting as my daughter’s friends.”

His words made me feel strange. It was as if I had actually become his beloved daughter. Why was he doing this? I tried to organize my thoughts, but Father didn’t give me a chance to.

“Please, I wish you all a comfortable time.”

“Thank you for your consideration,” my guests said in unison.

After receiving their words of gratitude, Father turned toward me. “Have a good time,” he said.

I quickly pulled myself together and bowed as well. “Thank you, Father.”

“His Grace Duke Floyen is truly kind,” someone mumbled softly after Father had disappeared from sight.

Kind...

If we were like any other father and daughter, I would’ve made a great fuss to affirm those words. However, I could only nod passively.

What I had just witnessed was an unfamiliar sight even to me.



Three minutes had passed since I poured warm water on the tea leaves in the teapot. A fragrant aroma emanated from the teapot when I lifted the lid to fish out the tea leaves. After I finished brewing the tea, I glanced toward Marilyn and pointed at the pot. “Please serve this to everyone,” I said.

I skimmed over the tea table for a moment, and as I did so, my eyes landed on the empty seat next to me. A cup sat in front of it.

He would’ve enjoyed this since the tea set had flower patterns...

I snapped back to my senses, realizing that I was thinking about Max even in his absence.

The attendees gushed about the tea in admiration. “Oh my goodness, the scent is wonderful.”

The method used to efficiently restore low-cost tea leaves that had lost or warped their scent or was to give them a new scent entirely. This meant that giving good quality tea leaves a new scent would produce a very delicious and aromatic tea.

This was called cost-effectiveness, I thought with pride. Instead of purchasing new tea leaves, I had put a new scent into the tea leaves we already had at home. Thanks to this method, I didn’t have to spend a fortune preparing for the party. I smiled, thoroughly satisfied with my decision since I was able to save money and avoid embarrassing myself.

“Wow, I can smell a strong scent of roses coming from the tea,” someone whispered in awe.

“It’s amazing.”

“It’s more than amazing; it’s great!”

“The tea is really fragrant and delicious. It also pairs well with the food.”

“I agree. Plus, the floral decor makes it all very pleasing to the eyes.”

I was a bit taken aback from seeing the ladies appreciate what I had prepared since I hadn’t expected much of a reaction from them. After all, my initial goal wasn’t to become a member of the tea tasting party, but to simply save face.

I didn’t expect them to enjoy something as trivial as this. A strange sensation arose within me, and an absurd impulse struck me as I had been plunged into a state of confusion: I wanted to show them something even better next time. I wanted to prepare something without considering the cost.

I was brought back to reality when someone addressed me directly. “How did you get the scent on the tea leaves?” Lady Terrence asked. She gazed at me with keen eyes.

Ah, she brought me back to my senses. While I didn’t think she intended to do

so, I had unintentionally received a lot of help from her.

“You know how the scent of tea leaves can disappear or go bad if you store them incorrectly?”

“Yes, of course.” I could see everyone nodding their heads like the tea enthusiasts they were.

“That was because tea leaves have the tendency to absorb the scents around them. So, if you mix dried petals or fruits with the tea leaves, then they will absorb that scent,” I explained. “If you want a stronger fragrance, then you could extract the oil from within those items and have the tea leaves absorb that instead.”

When I finished speaking, Lady Terrence watched me with a bizarre look in her eye as she sipped at her tea. Seeing how quiet everyone had become, I started to wonder if I had bored them with the description I gave.

Well, I guess all lengthy explanations tend to get dull. With this thought in mind, I decided to add something that they might find interesting to pick things back up a bit.

“After you brew the tea, you can reuse the tea leaves by drying them and putting them in the pockets of the clothing in your closet. It has a deodorizing effect.”

I heard someone marvel at my words. “Oh my goodness, that’s amazing,” she said.

“I’m truly amazed, Lady Floyen. How did you come to gain such knowledge...!”

“And it’s phenomenal how you came up with the idea of making tea leaves absorb the aromas of other things!”

The truth was that the ideas I had come up with were all other people’s knowledge I had picked up once before, but I couldn’t tell them that. If I were to do so, then I would have to tell them that I had been reincarnated.

Because of this, my response was vague. “Oh, I just happened to find out... it was all because of a coincidence,” I said. I silently prayed that someone would change the subject after noticing my ambiguous response to their praises.

Just in time, Lady Terrence spoke up. “Ah, I just thought of something.”

“Yes, what is it?”

She shot me a weird look when I answered her enthusiastically, but she promptly continued. “Have you all heard that the crown prince has returned to the capital?”

It was the first I had heard such news. If I had known earlier, I would’ve left and gone on a vacation or something. I guess it made sense since he would be present during the princess’ coming-of-age ceremony, though, and it would ultimately be useless for me to try to run away since all the nobles would probably be forced to attend.

“I see,” I responded flatly. I sipped my tea. A moment ago, it had been fragrant and pleasant, but now it just felt like I was drinking plain warm water. I squinted, feeling a headache coming on.

“Now that I think about it, there hasn’t been any news yet about who’s been chosen to become the crown princess.”

At the mention of the future crown princess, everyone fell silent as they tried to decipher each other’s expressions.

“I’ve heard rumors that he’s a terrible person,” one lady stated.

“Likewise. I’m afraid to be chosen to get married to him,” another commented.

I listened to their chattering for a while, then sighed softly. It was obvious that the crown prince needed to be avoided, but Father had already gone and chosen him as my fiancé.

I was silently resenting Father when the door leading to us opened. A handsome man with black hair, red eyes, and an appearance compelling enough to impress anyone who caught sight of him stepped foot into the drawing room.

“Max?”

He nodded at me. “Yes. I’m late... my lady.”

His polite words came out a little awkwardly, but compared to how he used to

speaking, it was perfectly acceptable. For some reason, after seeing his face, the uneasy feeling inside me subsided.

“Sit here,” I said, pointing to the seat next to me. As soon as he sat down, the members of the tea tasting party observed us oddly.

Um, why were they staring at us?

At that moment, Lady Terrence spoke. “I’m glad you have a partner, at least.”

“I’m sorry?” I replied.

She furrowed her eyebrows and clarified her meaning coldly. “What I mean is: you won’t be chosen as the crown princess.”

Her words flustered me. I know it was just us here, but was it really okay for us to talk this openly about the crown prince? I was thinking hard about how to react when the other ladies chimed in.

“I agree. I honestly don’t think anyone would want to become the crown princess.”

Even though I sympathized with them since the rumors, as well as the original novel, described what a terrifying person he was, there was a reason why I didn’t get involved in the slander. I heard the crown prince knew about everything that people said behind his back...

This wasn’t because he was an almighty character with superpowers, but because of an information guild he secretly controlled. If I could, I would trample him into a fine dust. However, as the unfortunate owner of a terrible fate, I couldn’t afford to speak ill of him. I could end up with an entirely different slew of problems if I joined the ladies in their gossip.

Suddenly, the rumors being mentioned around me started to grow more intense in nature. “I heard that even the former empress had shunned the crown prince.”

“You’re right. He’s apparently had a horrible personality ever since he was young.”

My face hardened at those words. I didn’t think I should let this continue. Up until now, I had done everything I could to avoid the crown prince. It would be

awfully unfair if I were put back on my route to eventual death just because some people had gossiped about him at my residence.

I was trying my best to avoid him... I couldn't just let them be. For this reason, I spoke carefully while remaining conscious of the possibility that one of the crown prince's informants might be listening somewhere nearby. "Isn't it too early to be jumping to conclusions when we haven't even met him yet?" I asked. "He might be more generous than we think."

When I had finished, I noticed that the noblewomen were all giving me sour looks.

"Oh, I guess... that might be true."

"I-I agree!"

"You're right."

The atmosphere suddenly turned awkward as everyone began to stutter. I was well aware that I had just blurted out a bunch of nonsense, but they were never going to know that I had just saved them from their deaths. Did I really have to go as far as to do this? I was already busy trying to take care of myself...

I was feeling a little distressed when someone commented something about me.

"You're so easy-going, Lady Floyen," she said. "To have such a positive mindset... you're such a role model."

It was ambiguous whether she was being sarcastic or praising me, but it didn't matter. Either way, I was tired, so I didn't want to spend much longer having tea with them. They were probably not too happy to be with me, either. I would have to empty the teapot quickly so they could go home.

With this thought in mind, I diligently drank my tea. Ah, it was hotter than I thought it would be. I felt like I might've burnt my tongue slightly, but I acted like nothing happened. I quietly rolled my roughened tongue in my mouth to soothe it.

"I agree," Max, who was quietly drinking his tea next to me, suddenly said.

He agreed? I guess he meant that I looked pretty easy-going. With this

thought in mind, I put down my teacup.

I could see my reflection in his beautiful scarlet eyes. They resembled garnets or pomegranates. He gave off such a strong impression for a side character.

At that moment, I noticed a change in his expression. His lips had lifted into a smile and his eyes seemed to curve gently. Now that he was smiling, he gave off a completely different impression. When he was expressionless, he looked cold-hearted, but now, he looked friendly. He was so good at acting. People might genuinely assume that he honestly liked me.

My thoughts were being rather nonsensical, so I held back my laughter at that last idea.

“The fact that you don’t believe in rumors or judge others hastily is a great mindset to have... my lady,” he noted.

The laughter bubbling inside me subsided when I noticed something strange about what he had said. This guy... he almost spoke informally again.

It was frustrating to see him continue to make the same mistake, especially since this wasn’t his first time doing so. He should have gotten used to it by now.

Be careful, I thought as I sent Max a glare.

“I agree as well,” Rose suddenly stated, sympathizing with Max. When I gave her a peculiar look, she smiled sweetly at me in return. “Come to think of it, we’ve realized a lot of things from what has happened recently,” she said.

Realized what?

I was puzzled by her words, but then she elaborated further. “I mean about you, Lady Floyen. I actually thought you would be a scary person like the rumors said.”

At her confession, I felt a prick at my conscience. I actually was a scary person not too long ago...

Rose, who had no idea what I was thinking, continued. “But when I exchanged letters with you, I could tell that you were a really sweet and kind person.”

I felt odd hearing the words *sweet and kind person* being used to describe me

as I had only pretended to be that way so that others wouldn't grow hostile toward me. Because of that, I started to feel a little guilty.

"I agree."

"Me, too."

The noblewomen who concurred with Rose were named Mary Ann and Catherine. Although they were side characters in the novel, later on, they would become close friends with the princess in the future.

"Lady Floyen must have harmed Her Highness!"

"She's right. I definitely saw her hand over the glass!"

Since they were originally people who would come to antagonize me, I became dubious at the sight of them expressing their favor for me now.

"I was very impressed with your behavior just now, Lady Floyen," Mary Ann said.

I frowned. "Huh? My behavior?" No matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't understand what she meant. I was simply relieved that others thought I wasn't a nuisance, let alone someone who behaved impressively.

As if to answer my question, Catherine placed her teacup down on her saucer beamed. "No matter how close a lady is to a friend, it's not easy to reveal the secret behind making great tea like this."

A secret? I only told them because I thought it was common sense... I became flustered, unaware that they would think this highly of me. "No, it's just..." I began, but I couldn't think of what to say. Of course, I was extremely grateful that they viewed me in a positive light, but I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable since they were praising me after misinterpreting my behavior.

That was why I decided to be frank and confess that this wasn't what I wanted. However, Mary Ann and Catherine stopped me before I could speak.

"I agree. I'm thankful that you trusted us enough to tell us this."

"Although this is only my second time meeting you personally, I'm deeply moved by your kindness."

This really wasn't what I had hoped for. I sat in utter confusion.

"That's enough, everyone," Lady Terrence said.

Finally, someone who was capable of making a proper decision amidst all the people unable to form rational judgements here...

Lady Terrence continued, glancing over at me. "Although Lady Floyen kindly shared the secret behind her tea, answered all of our questions, and is a better person than we had originally thought, we should remain unbiased in our evaluations of the tea."

Was it my imagination or did it seem like she was complimenting me somewhat? In any case, I had no intention of becoming an active member of the tea tasting party, so I quickly agreed with her. "She's right. I would like things to remain unbiased as well."

Lady Terrence nodded. "On that note, I'll say in all fairness that the tea Lady Floyen had served us today seemed like an ordinary Darjeeling tea at a glance."

It was true. The tea leaves looked pleasant to the eyes because they had flowers mixed in, but there was no way anyone was going to be staring at the tea leaves themselves because they were meant to be placed in some filter paper upon brewing. Well, I guess that meant I failed the membership test.

"But the process of using a special technique to give the tea leaves a new scent was excellent," Lady Terrence continued, contrary to my expectations. "The fragrance was very nice as well. Could I say that it felt like a field of dewy roses had bloomed in my mouth?"

I was listening to Lady Terrence's praise with a blank face, yet to process what any of it meant, when she warned, "Keep in mind that you will be kicked out if you break the rules of our party in the future."

Kicked out? I didn't have enough time to think about what that sudden phrase implied when the others around us began to congratulate me.

"Oh my goodness, congratulations!"

"We'll be able to see each other more in the future!"

"We're pleased to have you as a new member!"

That was when I came to my senses. *Ah, Lady Terrence. How could you... have let me pass?* I lamented to myself.



"Oh, time passed by so fast!"

"We'll let you know in advance when the next meeting is!"

The members of the tea tasting party bid me their farewells one by one.

"Could I write to you as well from now on?" Lady Terrence asked with a blush.

"Of course," Jubelian nodded slightly.

Her face brightened. "See you next time!"

After she left, only two people remained in the empty drawing room. Max gazed at Jubelian with gentle eyes.

"I heard that even the former empress had shunned the crown prince."

A bitter smile formed on Max's face as he recalled those words.

"Don't come back here from now on. I don't know where the poison might be," his mother had told him.

The reason why the former empress had driven her son away from her was because she was afraid that he could be poisoned. Max, aware of this truth, didn't suffer from the growing rumors because he knew his mother loved him despite what others said.

"I'm sorry," she had told him. *"I don't think I'll be able to protect you."*

After his mother had passed, the only reason Max had been able to survive under Empress Isabelle's evil influence was because of his newfound temporary ally, Duke Floyen. Empress Isabelle had known that using force wouldn't be enough, so she attempted to destroy the young crown prince's mind.

She spread malicious rumors to tear him apart. *"The crown prince is violent and has a cold heart. He sheds neither blood nor tears,"* they went. At first, Max

felt angry and victimized, but even after he tried to denounce those claims, nothing seemed to change. Because of this, he chose to ignore the rumors about him, because even if he paid attention to each and every lie they told, the situation wouldn't get any better.

Over time, he began to think that it wouldn't be so bad to become the cold-hearted monster the rumors spoke about. He decided it would be better than being threatened by those who looked down on him.

Even so, when Jubelian had defended him during the tea party, something arose inside him and shook him to the core.

It was a strange sensation. How come she was so different from the others? Max watched Jubelian with a deepened gaze.

Suddenly, she turned to look at him. He could have glanced away, but he continued to stare, the desire to look into her eyes reigning over him. When their eyes met, the sound of his heart pounding rang loudly in his ears. Did she feel the same way as him? He silently hoped she did.

However, Jubelian only grumbled in return.

"I guess I'm stuck with having to engage in social events from now on," she sighed.

What was wrong with social events? Max almost voiced his question unthinkingly, but he shut his mouth before he did. When he thought about it, Jubelian always acted strange. During the banquet, she was alone and had only answered others' questions instead of starting conversations of her own accord.

He suddenly recalled the gossip he had heard about her one day: *"It was Lady Floyen who made me interested in attending the banquet, especially since she always caused trouble..."*

Only then did Max realize why he had become so angry back then. Was it because she was so similar to him?

Max finally opened his mouth. "Don't worry," he assured her. "Everything will be fine."



Fresia knit her eyebrows as she read the report from her subordinate. The secret rendezvous with Marquis Lennox was a success, but now the problem lied with the empress.

The latest rumor being spread by the empress was truly a malicious one. The report read:

The crown prince, who had been shunned by his own mother, has returned as a brutal tyrant who slaughters his enemies like a butcher. How could a man like him ever be a wise ruler?

“God damn this sly, evil bitch!” Fresia hissed.

If this was the public opinion in the empire, then the crown prince’s claim to the throne could be put into question until he made a great contribution.

Worst-case scenario, he would have to forfeit his status as the crown prince. Although she couldn’t say he was a nice person, Max had never crossed the line. During wars, he had always told her to keep the weak alive even though they couldn’t fight. As such, most of the stigma surrounding the crown prince had been unjustly wrought.

Despite that, whenever he heard anyone speaking dishonorably about him, Max only responded with indifference. “I don’t really care. Just report all the rumors you hear about me,” he would say.

However, knowing that Max had been wounded by what happened with the former empress, Fresia didn’t dare to report this to him honestly. She needed to request for others not to speak about this rumor so that her lord wouldn’t hear about it.

She tore up the report containing the rumor and tossed it in the fireplace. As she watched the document burn, she began thinking of ways to make the rumor die down. She needed someplace that wouldn’t be affected even if the empress decided to act up...

At that moment, a familiar voice interrupted her thoughts.

“What are you doing?” Max asked.

Startled by his sudden appearance, Fresia pretended to be calm. “Oh, welcome back,” she greeted. When she turned her head to examine him, she noticed that his eyes were a bit mellow and that he had a somber aura. He looked calm.

“How did things go with Marquis Lennox?”

“Oh, we were successful in reaching him,” she explained. “He’s requested for us to send about 20,000 of our men.”

Losing 20,000 soldiers wasn’t a big deal, but Marquis Lennox’s army only consisted of around 60,000 men. Even if reinforcements were sent over, victory still wasn’t guaranteed.

He probably didn’t want to suffer a loss if he were to fail. If Max sent reinforcements as requested, it would be like putting those men on death row. Because of this, Fresia was hoping Max would refuse.

Contrary to her expectations, however, the heartless crown prince’s command differed from her wishes. “Send the reinforcements,” he said.

“What? If we do that, they’ll only be wiped out.” She tried dissuading him, but he was adamant about his decision.

“A small sacrifice is worth it if I can gain something bigger out of it.”

He was right. If Max supported the southern border, then he would be able to gain support from the southern forces, including Marquis Lennox. Even so, Fresia couldn’t find it in herself to be happy. Did she forget that those people were his men?

He sounded like a cold-blooded man who could abandon his subordinates for the sake of achieving his goals... she tried to deny her thoughts, telling herself that those were all just groundless rumors, but she couldn’t help the ache she felt in her heart.

It was all her fault for not advising him well. Fresia bitterly laughed at herself.

Then, she heard Max’s voice once more.

“However, send 50,000 men instead.”

50,000 soldiers were enough to guarantee a victory, but it would be a huge burden to send this many reinforcements since they made up a significant portion of his military strength. Knowing that Max was someone who didn't like doing anything that would cause him to suffer any sort of loss, Fresia regarded her lord with astonishment.

“Do you mean that?” she gasped.

Objectively, it would be most beneficial for Max to send only 20,000 men because he still had a rebellion to execute. Even if they were annihilated, it would certainly be a loss, but it would be one that he could endure. However, unbeknownst to Fresia, there was another reason behind Max's decision to send more than he technically needed to.

Jubelian wouldn't consider him evil if he went as far as to do something like this, would she? Max smirked as he recalled her face.

Meanwhile, the sight of Max's smiling face made Fresia recoil in fright. Yes, she was sure he would change his mind. His current decision was probably just a whim. A mistake.

However, Max didn't take his words back. “If we only send 20,000 men, my soldiers would just end up dying in vain, wouldn't they? I'd rather send a higher number to improve our chances of victory.”

Feeling deeply moved by Max's determination, Fresia knelt on one knee. “My lord... you've grown into an excellent person.”

Her gesture brought a strange look to Max's face. She had misunderstood him, so he frowned. He ended up hearing all kinds of things just from trying to look good for Jubelian.

As the unfamiliar feeling rose within him, Max quickly switched the topic. “There's something I need you to do for me,” he said.

“Go ahead, my lord,” Fresia enthused. “I'll carry out this duty at the risk of my life!”

When Max told her his request, Fresia looked perplexed. “What? You don't

want rumors about you and Lady Floyen to spread?”

“Yes.”

Why would someone who usually allowed rumors about him to run rampant care so much about another person’s gossip? Fresia was dumbfounded, but soon she realized that Max had begun to change after he had met Lady Floyen. She was really beginning to wonder what kind of person the lady was, having trouble believing that there was someone out there who could make the prince act like this.

Fresia’s eyes shone as she bowed. “I will endeavor to serve as best I can,” she swore.

After Fresia left, Max furrowed his brows as he recalled the contract’s clauses. He should probably say goodbye to her before leaving.



“A letter has arrived for you, my lady,” Marilyn said.

I checked the sender of the letter, discovering that it was from Lady Terrence, or Veronica as I had come to know her as. She sent me this so soon. Did she have something to say to me?

I removed the wax seal and opened the letter. Its contents were filled with descriptions about the unfair treatment she had received from Mikhail, such as him seeing multiple women aside from her at once. She ended the letter by expressing her worry for me, saying that Mikhail was abnormally obsessed with me.

This man should really be punished by the heavens. I let him go until now because of what I had done to him in the past, but I had been aware that he had been seeing multiple people at once back then. It was more like he was manipulating his personal relationships so that he could use them whenever he needed them, but even that distressed me.

Reading her letter reminded me of my foolish past. For some unknown

reason, a bitter taste engulfed my mouth and I started craving something sweet. Should I ask Matthew to bake me a cake? But the ones at the tearoom were better than the ones he made...

My worries were cut short.

“Merilyn, could you get me ready to go out?”

“Yes, my lady. I’ll help you change into some new clothes first.”

After she finished helping me change, she started to make her way toward the door. “Please wait here for a moment. I’ll report your outing to the butler,” she said.

“Okay.”

Max should be here tomorrow since he wasn’t here today, right? I smiled. Since I was going out anyway, I was thinking about buying Max a cake as well.

Suddenly, my planning was interrupted by a tapping sound at my window.

I stiffened slightly. It wasn’t a pigeon, was it? I nervously crept toward the window. I peeked out and sighed in relief when I spotted Max’s familiar face. I told him to use the door like a normal person, but he came by this way again. As soon as I undid the latch, he entered the room.

“Welcome,” I greeted.

“Are you going somewhere?”

At that moment, Merilyn’s voice filtered in from outside the door. “My lady, everything’s ready,” she announced.

My gaze flitted over to Max at those words. “Good timing. I was going to go get some cake. Let’s go together,” I offered. I assumed that he would accept since he was someone who could eat multiple slices of cake all by himself.

Instead of answering me, however, he just gazed at me stiffly. “I have something to say,” he eventually managed, his voice low.

I nodded, thinking that he was just going to say some nonsense like he usually did, but my eyes widened at the words that left his mouth.

“Something came up and I need to take care of it.”

I raised an eyebrow at the phrase *take care of it*, and asked if *it* was related to his occupation, which was something I had been thinking about since we first met. “*Take care of* as in mercenary work?”

“It’s similar.”

I wanted him to deny my suspicions, but he meekly confirmed them instead. I flinched with fright at the thought of him possibly getting hurt. “Is it dangerous?” I asked.

He looked at me and shook his head. “I don’t engage in fights I might lose.”

In short, he meant that he didn’t take on difficult tasks. Seeing as how my life motto was to live safely, I sympathized with him. “Good thinking,” I said. “There’s no need to push yourself into doing dangerous things.”

His eyes turned gentle. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to come by for a while because of this,” he muttered softly.

I was suddenly glad that I had clearly stated that we needed to inform each other of our potential absences in the contract. If things were to play out anything like they did before, he would’ve left without a word. By *a while*... he probably meant a few days, right?

Merilyn’s voice interrupted my inner thoughts. “Lady Floyen?”

I glanced at Max and replied, “Okay. Then let’s have some cake for now.”

Instead of responding, he smiled at me. I gaped at him in return, unsure why he was doing so. “There’s something around your eyes,” he noted.

Thinking that my makeup must’ve gotten smudged, I immediately took out my handkerchief, but he suddenly snatched it away from me. I turned to him, dumbfounded.

“You better get your head screwed on straight now that I won’t be around,” he warned me. “Don’t absentmindedly stand around. Keep your guard up.”

It was quite frankly ridiculous for him to be saying such things to me because he was someone who lacked knowledge about worldly affairs, but as I was about to tell him to mind his own business, he continued speaking.

“We’ll have some cake together when I get back. Also... don’t turn your

attention to anyone else while I'm gone." With those final words, he jumped out the window.

He just said what he had to say and left again. I watched as he went, then closed the window. Well, he would be back in a few days. Everything would be fine.

I was about to head out as planned when I suddenly sighed. "Merilyn, I'm sorry about this, but I think I'll stay home instead," I said. For some strange reason, I had lost my appetite. I didn't feel like eating anything anymore.

Slowly, I closed my eyes as an intense wave of fatigue came over me.



"Lady Jubelian!"

I jolted awake at the sound of someone calling my name. When I opened my eyes, I discovered that I wasn't in my room.

Ah. I dozed off at Rose's tea party. Perhaps it was because I hadn't been sleeping very well lately, but oftentimes, I would stare off into space, eventually dozing off. When I looked around, I could see Veronica pouting at me.

"Wake up, Lady Floyen. You fell asleep in the middle of a conversation."

It had already been two months since I had passed the test to become a member of the tea tasting party. I had attended four tea parties since then, and had become quite close to the other members.

Father had been rather quiet lately, and there still wasn't any news from Max... I had no idea that *a while* was going to end up becoming two whole months. Maybe this was why everything around me felt so calm.

"I'm telling you, Sir Nathan got slapped in the face by his fiancée, Lady Swan."

"Oh my goodness. Why?"

"I heard that he was seeing Lady Swan's cousin behind her back!"

...I guess it wasn't all that quiet, after all.

At any rate, the important thing was that Father hadn't been interfering with my relationship with Max these days. Moreover, I didn't have a clue if my blind date with the crown prince had been cancelled or not, but there hadn't been any mention of it since he returned to the capital.

Should I have been glad about this? I pondered over it as I took a biscuit and dropped it in my mouth. The saltiness of the biscuit made its sweetness much more prominent. Max would like this, I thought.

Unlike me, the other members were chatting away without sparing the biscuits a glance.

"Her Royal Highness' coming-of-age will take place soon," someone noted. I stopped eating and focused on the conversation more.

The royal princess' coming-of-age ceremony was about a month and a fortnight away, wasn't it? Originally, that was when the royal princess was meant to slap me in the face for grabbing a lady's hair and causing a scene. I was to become the first victim of Beatrice, a royal who was known to be very direct and straight-forward.

Along as I stayed as I was now, I figured things would be okay. Mikhail had been rather quiet as well.

At that moment, I heard an excited voice speak up.

"That's what I'm saying! I'm wondering what kind of dress I should wear to the banquet."

"You'll be at risk if you dress up too fancily. If you somehow end up catching the crown prince's eyes, then..." she trailed off.

"I get scared just thinking about it."

Alright. I should dress as plainly as possible should the time come. With this thought in mind, I waited for the tea tasting party to conclude. Then, the door burst open and someone rushed into the drawing room while making a big fuss.

"Rose! Oh, my god! Do you know what I just heard?"

Rose narrowed her eyes at the interrupter. "Nate! How could you enter without even knocking?"

After Rose's scolding, Nate, her brother, looked flustered. "Ah, excuse me, ladies," he said sheepishly. "I apologize for the sudden interruption." His blushing face combined with his ginger hair made his whole head look bright red. The tea party members giggled at the humorous sight.

"What made you rush in here like this?" Mary Ann asked.

"Oh, I was just here to inform everyone that Lagon has declared war on us," Nate answered.

The shocking news caused a great commotion amongst us.

"Lagon? It couldn't be!"

"Will we be okay?"

Unlike the others who were startled by the news, I simply sighed. I had already known this would happen from having read the novel. Marquis Lennox, who had been trying to expand his army, would go to war and fail. The ones who were going to save the empire from the crisis were supposed to be the emperor and Father, who would join the war to aid him.

Nevertheless, the next bit of news that Nate provided us with was different from what I had remembered. "Yes, of course," he nodded. "Marquis Lennox has been successful in defending the southern border since he started preparing for everything two months ago. And in the midst of the confusion, the crown prince beheaded Lagon's commander."

What? The crown prince? I became confused by this strange turn of events. They differed vastly from the original novel.

Nate continued, clueless about what was going through my head. "In a month, the palace will be holding a victory banquet." He glanced around at all of us. "It'll be a banquet that all nobles will be obliged to attend," he announced.

I frowned at this. *Ugh*, I didn't know the crown prince was going to play an active part in the war like this. And now an unexpected mandatory banquet, at that... the ominous premonition I had before must've been about this. I gulped down the remainder of my black tea, but it had gone cold during this disturbance. It was so... bitter.

Unlike me, the others were making a great fuss.

“Tell us all the details about what happened,” Veronica stated, her eyes shining with anticipation.

Nate nodded with a blush. “Yes, of course.” He ended up taking a seat at the table. “Do you know how Marquis Lennox had been lobbying to expand his army?” he began.

“Yes, I’ve heard of this.”

“And you know that his requests were ignored, right?”

“Of course.”

“Because of that, he was secretly expanding his army, but it only amounted to about 60,000 men. At that time, the crown prince had noticed a few unusual movements from Lagon, so he sent reinforcements to aid him.”

“Unusual movements?”

“It was said that they were storing suspiciously large amounts of grain as well as drying any food that could be stored for an extended period of time. The crown prince found out and instantly determined that they were meant to be provisions.”

The ladies began to murmur among themselves after listening intently to Nate.

“Oh, my goodness. I didn’t know he held such wisdom. He sounds like a completely different person now!”

“I agree!”

Listening to them whisper, Nate’s voice excitedly went up a pitch. “Marquis Lennox had originally requested 20,000 men, but the crown prince generously lent 50,000 men instead—which was about half of the men in the northern garrison—saying that any less would prove a useless sacrifice at best.”

“Oh, wow!”

“He also ordered the soldiers not to attack the weak ones who couldn’t fight, which boosted his public opinion in Lagon as well,” Nate continued.

Why would the crown prince be so generous? I tried to guess what his motives could have possibly been, but I felt too lazy, so I gave up. No matter his supposed heroism, he still bore the essence of a sadist. He was a terrible man who shed neither blood nor tears.

Despite that, it seemed that everyone else around me began to believe differently. “Wow, during a time where even the knights have abandoned their chivalry. How amazing!”

The monstrous crown prince being chivalrous? Just the thought of that sounded ridiculous. I understood why they were saying these things since they didn’t know what kind of person the crown prince really was, but still, I had hoped that they would stop praising him because it was making me uncomfortable. Unfortunately, it did not stop. The flattering comments continued pouring in.

“If you think about it, the crown prince being unattractive doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re right. I’ve heard that Her Majesty, the former empress, was renowned for being quite beautiful.”

“Maybe he’s extremely handsome, so he covers his face with a helmet because he’s afraid that he’ll be looked down upon by others.”

Even if someone’s mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, there was still a chance that her child could end up ugly. More importantly, what mattered wasn’t his appearance, but the fact that he was a crazy tyrant. Appearances weren’t everything... one wrong step could ruin someone’s entire life.

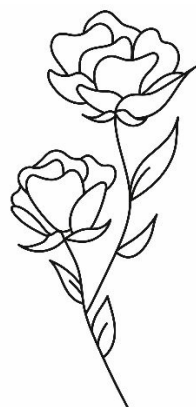
I sighed as I recalled how I used to follow Mikhail around for his charming face.

“Ah, Lady Jubelian,” Veronica prompted. “Would you like to go to the temple with me tomorrow?”

I would’ve gone with her in the past, but since I had been feeling oddly lethargic lately, I felt reluctant to go. Just as I was about to decline her invitation, however, she urged me on some more.

“Why don’t you come with me? Sometimes going to new places helps you feel better.”

I wasn’t sure how she managed to sound so convincing, but I ended up sighing and nodding at her words. I hadn’t even been allowed the chance to refute them.



The Walls Have Ears

A shattering sound rang throughout the room as the empress threw a boy-shaped ceramic figure. “Maximillian, that cursed rat,” she scowled. “It wouldn’t be enough for me to rip him into pieces!”

The empress huffed and puffed as anger boiled inside her, then started biting her nails. “I’m positive he’s determined to ruin my daughter’s coming-of-age ceremony!” she accused.

Each event held in the imperial palace had different levels of priority. Small balls were held all the time, which meant that no one was obligated to attend. People weren’t required to attend the yearly banquets regarding the founding of this empire, harvest season, and the birthdays of the royal family, either.

However, all nobles were required to attend victory banquets that celebrated great triumphs in war and once-in-a-lifetime banquets such as a coronation ceremony or a royal family member’s coming-of-age ceremony as they were considered immensely significant. In addition, it was common practice for there to be a gap between mandatory banquets in order to draw attention to the star of each banquet.

The crown prince was already an eyesore to the empress. Along with making a great contribution to the war, he dared to schedule the victory banquet two weeks before her daughter’s coming-of-age ceremony, placing two mandatory banquets on the same month.

It must’ve been a ruse to irritate her little princess. If she could have, Isabelle would’ve torn the crown prince apart limb from limb right then and there. Perhaps doing so was possible for her now since he was probably binge drinking to commemorate the victory. Nonetheless, there was a reason why she couldn’t send an assassin after him at the moment.

“I can’t kill him even if I wanted to because of my... my little girl’s coming-of-age ceremony!” she fumed.

If a funeral were to be held for the crown prince, then the royal princess' coming-of-age ceremony would have to be cancelled. If that were to happen, the empress' plan to marry her daughter off to a decent family in order to gain their support was going to be ruined.

The empress' eyes shot open fiercely. "It would have been reassuring... if that child had been born a man instead," she murmured.

The royal princess was listening in from outside the door, but she turned around. On her beautiful face, which resembled her mother's, sat a scowl.



"You may look around anywhere you would with the exception of prohibited areas," the priest guiding us around the temple said.

I gazed at the walls and floors made of white marble and the decorations made of gold scattered about. The priest had explained that the white marble represented the people's gentle heart toward God and the gold decorations represented the light created by God. The temple's splendor seemed indicative of this religious body's power. I guess it meant that anyone anywhere needed something to lean on. With this thought, I decided to find a quiet place to be, but...

"Shall we go have our fortunes told?"

"Yes! And if we're going to, we should have someone tell us our love fortunes as well!"

I was helplessly dragged along with my friends since both of my arms were locked in theirs. I felt like a criminal under arrest.

As I thought such trivial thoughts, the prophecy room quickly came into sight. The prophecies were the main source of income that maintained the temple's fancy interior and the reason why so many people visited this place.

"Welcome," an elderly priest greeted us when we stepped into the room. "What would you ladies like to know about today?"

At her question, Rose and Veronica shouted their answers at the same time. "Our love lives!"

It wouldn't be unreasonable to be startled by a group of noblewomen making such a commotion, but the priest remained calm as if she had seen this sort of thing many times before. "Who shall we start with?" she asked.

I assumed that they would decide between the two of them, but they both pointed to me at the same time, exclaiming, "Her!"

I sighed. "Wait, I'm not really—" I tried to refuse, but Veronica shot back a retort as if she were frustrated by me.

"You've been in low spirits since you've fallen out of touch with your lover," she said. "Wouldn't it cheer you up if you heard some good news?"

As much as I wanted to deny her claims, I knew it was true that I had felt like something was missing while he was away. Most of all, I was worried because I hadn't heard a single word from him ever since. "Alright," I acquiesced, giving in with a sigh.

The priest extended both arms out to me and said, "Hold my hands."

As soon as I did as she bid, warmth and an unfamiliar prickly feeling began flowing into me. "You who go against time, let go of prejudice and face the truth before you," she began.

You who go against time? Huh?

"Excuse me, what does that mean?" I questioned, bothered by her words.

The priest nodded at my question, but she didn't answer it. "I see quite a few people who love you passionately or are going to do so in the future. You should be careful, for this might complicate things."

What did she mean by people who loved me? I was in a situation where I couldn't even think of a single person who might. My thoughts were already complicated enough, but hearing a strange prophecy that I didn't want to hear only made me more disturbed.

"I'll have to go to the prayer room for a while," I muttered uncomfortably.

"Ah, okay. Go ahead." Rose and Veronica nodded in bewilderment at the

unexpected prophecy.

“Lady Floyen,” someone suddenly called me. “The fee for your prophecy is one gold,” the priest said, smiling sweetly as she held out her hand.

Oh, that was daylight robbery.

Just as I thought, fortune telling was useless.



I grant royal permission for the banquet as the crown prince Maximillian has greatly contributed to this victory.

Max smiled as he read the emperor’s letter. Now that he had an opportunity to meet Jubelian like Fresia had said, all that was left was... he removed a flower-patterned handkerchief from his inner pocket and felt laughter bubbling inside him as he recalled the cloth’s owner. He hoped she was doing well.

His thoughts were soon interrupted when a voice came from outside the door. “It’s Lennox, Your Highness.”

“Come in.”

A middle-aged man who gave off a strong impression entered Max’s room. A smile soon made its way upon his face and he commented, “I see that you’re looking at that handkerchief again.”

Max furrowed his brows and denied the marquis’ claim. “I’ve never done such a thing,” he said. Although the crown prince may have been in denial, everyone who had been on the battlefield knew that the man decked entirely in black armor had a floral handkerchief tied to the handle of his sword.

Marquis Lennox didn’t know which family’s esteemed daughter that handkerchief belonged to, but this was truly a sight to behold. He never thought he would bear witness such a simple-hearted side from someone like His Highness the Crown Prince. The marquis wore a serious expression as he tried to figure out who the owner of the handkerchief was when Max next spoke.

“So, what’s going on?” he inquired brusquely.

“It’s nothing but a messenger who has arrived from Lagon,” Marquis Lennox replied politely as he lowered his head. Lagon had suffered a lot by losing in this war, but there were still some people who had benefited.

“Is it from the new crown prince of Lagon?”

Originally, Lagon was under the rule of Klaus, its former commander, and his nephew, the crown prince. However, amidst the confusion, the king’s third son, prince Avalta, had attacked the original crown prince, successfully claiming his spot. Behind all of this was crown prince Maximillian, who commanded the southern army of Assiette. He had used the spy under his banner to read the complicated situation taking place within Lagon’s government and ignited the desires of the third prince, who had been living whilst keeping his ambitions hidden deep inside him. Doing so resulted in...

“Yes. He promised to do his best to support us during the rebellion.”

Max’s lips quirked into a smile when he realized he had benefited more from this ordeal than he had originally intended to. It wouldn’t be long before they would initiate the coup, and his body buzzed with anticipation, ready to take his father down and sit upon the throne himself.

“Everything will be perfect once you go back to the capital and reconcile with Duke Floyen,” Marquis Lennox said.

Max scowled. “That won’t happen. Not ever,” he stated bluntly.



I entered the prayer room with a sigh. Compared to other places, this room was quiet. It was proof that people would largely prefer to relieve their worries by spending large amounts of money buying prophecies or amulets rather than give sincere prayers.

I was going to go to the least populated part of this room, so I headed over to the corner where the fountain, which was said to grant wishes, was located. I

could see coins that had been thrown by others laying here and there beneath the waters.

I didn't believe in things like this, but... I closed my eyes and began making a wish. "Please let my future unfold smoothly and let Max come back safely," I pleaded. Then, I threw a coin in. I wanted it to land in the middle of the fountain, but sadly, I wasn't athletic enough. The coin fell to the ground instead.

Clink!

The lower-middle class spirit inside me cringed at the sound of the coin rolling on the ground. I mean, it was a silver coin. It would be a waste to just throw it away like this! Still, as the daughter of a duke, I had to maintain my dignity, which meant I couldn't just crouch down and search for it.

I looked around. Because I was in a corner, it seemed like no one would be able to see me clearly, and everyone seemed to be busy praying.

Alright. No one was looking at me.

I carefully crept away in the direction the coin rolled, but I was surprised to find someone on the other side of the fountain.

Red eyes...? I mindlessly stared at the person because of how familiar their eyes were. Then, I let out a hollow laugh. Oh, she was a woman.

As I was about to turn around and act like I hadn't seen her, I noticed a wetness running down her cheeks. She was crying. She wiped her tears with her sleeves as if she didn't have a handkerchief.

"Hey, are you oka—"

When I impulsively spoke up, the woman flinched at the sound of my voice and glared at me, startled.

"What do you want?" she asked harshly. I stiffened at her tone. Nonetheless, I could see that loneliness lingered in her fierce eyes.

She reminded me of myself. I carefully approached her and handed her my handkerchief, remembering how I had cried as I waited for Father to come to my debutante ball.

"Here you go," I muttered softly. I was going to leave if she shook me off, but

to my surprise, she took the handkerchief from my hand and wiped her tears away.

She must've been lonely, after all. I sat behind her and remained silent. I knew from experience that just being with someone could be a bigger comfort than listening to some shallow platitudes.

At that moment, I heard her blow her nose.

"Um, you can keep that handkerchief," I quietly commented.

Eventually, she stopped crying and started calming down. I realized I should probably start leaving at that point, but as I was about to stand up, I heard a quiet voice.

"There's too much expected of me," she murmured.

I automatically turned to look at her, discovering she had trained her crimson eyes upon me. Speaking impolitely to the daughter of a duke in this empire... she reminded me of Max. I felt a sense of déjà vu, but decided against saying anything to avoid causing a commotion.

She must've taken my continued silence as acceptance, so she continued. "The expectations upon me are so burdensome that sometimes I just want to let them go... but I can't," she whispered. "I fear that I'll be hated if I do so."

Perhaps it was because no one had ever expected anything of me before, but I couldn't sympathize with her. Nevertheless, when I took in her frightened expression, it reminded me of when I constantly used to strive to ensure I did not incur Father's hatred. I wondered if she didn't have any friends, either, since she was unveiling these feelings when we had only just met...

Suddenly, I noticed a coin sitting next to her feet. I pointed at it and asked, "Hey, could you pick that coin up for me?"

She frowned. "No."

"Okay, then," I replied apathetically.

I took out another silver coin from my pocket and tossed it toward the center of the fountain. Unfortunately, I ended up missing again. Ah, what a waste.

I was sorting through my regret when the woman began glaring at me. "What

are you doing?" she demanded.

Her appearance and tone prompted a certain someone to come to mind, but I answered calmly without showing it. "It is said that one's wish will come true if they throw a coin and it lands in the middle of this fountain. That's why I was planning on giving you that coin next to your feet," I explained.

She remained silent. Then, she picked up the coin I told her about. Throwing it, the coin launched neatly through the air and landed in the fountain, causing a splash followed by a small ripple near the fountain's center. A faint smile appeared on her face.

"Your wish will now come true," I mumbled softly as I gazed at her.

She blushed. "That's just a superstition!" she shot back brusquely. "Aren't you aware that this won't solve my problem?" Judging by her harsh tone, I figured that she was a very sensitive person.

"Yes, it's a superstition," I mused as I tossed another coin into the fountain. This time, it landed nearer to the center. "But sometimes, it's the little things that can encourage people to keep going."

She glanced between me and the fountain. Then, she narrowed her eyes at me. "What a strange thing to say."

When I was about to retort, telling her that I could claim the same about her, I heard a voice come from the entrance.

"Lady Jubelian!" Veronica called. "Where are you?"

I sighed. "I've got to go. I hope everything works out," I said.

Then, I quickly made my way back to the entrance.



The woman scowled as she watched Jubelian leave. What an arrogant girl. As if speaking to her informally wasn't enough, Jubelian dared to comment on her future.

“Maybe I should’ve asked for her name,” she muttered softly.

At that moment, a man approached her. He was an imperial knight who wore a uniform with the royal coat of arms engraved on its chest.

“We must return now, Your Highness,” he said.

Beatrice, the royal princess, nodded at him and went to cover her face with a black veil. Then, she recalled what she still held in her hand. She scrunched her nose. The handkerchief she was holding onto was originally clean, but it had since become soiled with her tears and snot.

Disgusting. Just as she was about to throw the handkerchief to the ground, she recalled what had just transpired.

“I’ve got to go. I hope everything works out,” the strange woman had said.

Remembering her innocent smile, Beatrice hesitated for a moment. Then, she gave a humorless smirk when she recalled what her mother had said.

“You wouldn’t be suffering like this only if you were born as a man.”

How dare that strange woman say such things when she didn’t even know anything about her situation?

Her coming-of-age ceremony would’ve been perfect. Her mother definitely would’ve been delighted if her coming-of-age was to be celebrated without any trouble in front of a great many people, and she would’ve been recognized by her father. But her stepbrother had to go and commit an act of brutality, shifting the population’s attention away from her. He became the new star of the banquet. Just thinking about it made her blood boil.

That random woman didn’t even know anything about her! Beatrice stomped on the pink handkerchief with the heel of her shoes to vent out her frustrations. She glared down at it for a moment, but as she did so, she started feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Her gaze shifted from furious to nervous.

“Bea, don’t be weak,” she remembered being told. *“You have to be perfect for your mother.”*

With a look of resolve, Beatrice covered her face with her veil. “Let’s go,” she stated firmly.



It was well past dinner time, but no one had touched the food set out on the long table in Duke Floyen's mansion. Regis had skipped dinner and was nervously pacing back and forth.

"Why hasn't Jubelian returned yet?" he asked. "She's never been this late before."

"She'll be here soon. She had been accompanied by her escort knights, so you shouldn't worry too much, Master."

He had selected the most talented men he had to guard her, which meant that she was going to be safe unless a transcendent being like him attacked. Furthermore, it was safe to say that no one would dare to attack Jubelian as long as he was still healthy. Regardless, he couldn't help but worry.

Should he have followed her? He was deep in thought when he sensed a carriage approaching the mansion. Quickly, he made his way to the front door. The moment he saw his daughter open it and step foot inside, he felt all the tension drain from his body. His shoulders sagged with relief, but he felt strangely choked up at the same time.

A foreign emotion arose within him. He wanted to ask why she had returned so late and if she knew how worried he was, fearing that something might've happened to her. He wanted to express the horrible anxiety he had just undergone, but he couldn't. Instead, what left his mouth was a voice as void of emotion as it could've been.

"You're late," he said.

"Oh, um... I was enjoying my time touring the temple," she explained.

Contrary to what she seemed to say, however, his daughter had a glum look on her face. In fact, her statement made no sense at all knowing that she hated crowded places by nature, but Regis didn't want to continue finding fault with her. He was afraid that his threadbare relationship with his daughter would fray

even further.

“Go change,” he said. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

She nodded weakly. “Yes, Father.”

Regis stared at her daughter’s retreating back as she walked away. Then, he clenched his fists.

That disgusting brute. How dare his disciple leave his daughter alone like this after claiming she was his weakness. Although Regis couldn’t say his daughter had been full of vitality, she was definitely livelier when Max was around. Ever since his disciple had left for war, Jubelian had been downcast. Even though Regis wanted to live like this with his daughter for a while longer, he knew that it wasn’t possible.

Now that he had made up his mind, he knew that his wish was as good as useless. He had no choice but to admit it now.

Regis had tried his best to deny it up until this point, but he decided to give in to the fact that his daughter needed someone to protect her and soothe her loneliness even when he wasn’t around. The person she needed the most right now was his disciple.



Dinner was quiet as usual. Father was never a talkative person, and if I really thought about it, I was actually similar to him in that regard. I guess we haven’t had anything to discuss lately...

I was aware that I wasn’t much of a chatty person, but this suddenly felt unfamiliar to me. Merilyn had attempted to start conversations with me when I was home and I had often met with the members of the tea tasting party, but there was still something missing. An empty gap inside me.

I stared at the steak on my plate for a moment, then sighed. Was Max eating well? Although I had only spent a short amount of time with him, he made me feel comfortable since I felt like I could be myself around him. We would laugh

and joke around. The time we had spent together had also helped me discover what kind of person I was.

A regretful thought passed through my head. If I had known that he would be gone for this long, I would've asked him to send me a letter. On the other hand, however, I was afraid. What if he ended up never coming back? I didn't dare to mention him to Father, but I wanted to ask in hopes that he knew the whereabouts of his only disciple.

Should I? I pondered it, then smiled bitterly. If I asked him, he would consider it strange that I hadn't received a single letter from someone I would call my lover. I guess the only choice I had was to wait for him to come back.

I was lamenting my situation when I heard Father's voice. "The crown prince's victory banquet will be held a month from now," he said.

I stilled at that. "Ah, yes," I managed eventually. "That's what I heard as well." I remained rigid, wondering why on earth he was bringing this up.

"You must be looking forward to it," he continued.

Looking forward to what? I wasn't looking forward to anything. Astonished, I felt a cold sweat run down my back. Still, I forced a smile on my face and replied vaguely. "Oh, well, it'll be a banquet, after all."

Father gave me a hint of a smile. "It's just around the corner. Have you gotten a dress fitted yet?" he questioned.

"Ah, no, I haven't." I had planned to just wear whatever to the banquet, but I couldn't say that to Father. Instead, I kept quiet.

"Why don't you make a dress you want and wear it to the banquet?" he suggested. He looked serious. "You won't have to worry about the price."

In other words, he was telling me to order the most colorful dress I could get so that I could catch the crown prince's eye. I started feeling suffocated. Max's face came to mind, but the reality of the situation was that there hadn't been any news from him ever since he left. It would be unreasonable to use dating him as an excuse to refuse Father's suggestions.

I clenched my fists tightly. Alright, I couldn't keep asking for Max's help

forever. I had to take care of things on my own from now on.



“There might be a spy among us. I think it’ll be best for Your Highness to travel back separately. I’ll have Victor stay here in his disguise.”

For this reason, the crown prince had decided to take only his closest aides with him as he traveled back to the capital separately, away from the triumphal procession.

“Please slow down, Your Highness! At this pace, the horses won’t be able to keep up. They’ll faint!” Dennis, the captain of the guards, shouted, but Max paid no heed to his cry. “Did he hide some treasure or something in the capital? Why was he in such a hurry?” Dennis muttered with a frown as he trailed behind Max. At this rate, a journey that would normally take about three to four days was going to be shortened by one or two days.

What on earth was he thinking? They would have to wait for the triumphal procession if they wanted to enter the palace... was he doing this to observe the capital’s movements in advance?

However, contrary to Dennis’ theories, the reason why Max was in a hurry was rather simple: he was finally going to be able to see Jubelian.

Thanks to this war, the crown prince’s reputation as a murderous, cold-blooded man who didn’t value his subordinates had been proven wrong. Max recalled what the people had been saying about him.

“His Highness the Crown Prince is so amazing!”

Max smiled. He was picturing Jubelian’s face when he suddenly heard a voice call out to him from behind.

“Your Highness, I think we need to take a break!”

Max paused and looked back. His subordinates’ horses had stilled themselves out of exhaustion.



I thought about calling the seamstress to our house since I was feeling too lazy to go out, but then I realized that if I did so, Father might intervene in the dress picking. So, I decided to go visit the dress shop in person.

It may have been due to the fact that a new banquet had suddenly been scheduled, but I found that my favorite dress shop was now overflowing with people who had visited to have a dress fitted. The place was a madhouse, but since I was still deep in thought, I couldn't hear all the noises.

What color should I wear if I wanted to avoid catching the crown prince's attention?

Suddenly, my ears picked up a few voices discussing the main culprit of my troubles.

"I've heard that the crown prince likes a calm color like blue," a noblewoman mentioned.

"That was a long time ago," another said. "I've heard that his preference has recently trended more toward showy colors like red."

"Wouldn't a bright color be okay as well? It would help me stand out!"

They were all groundless claims, but listening to them gave me the impression that a lot of people would be attending the banquet in noticeable primary colors.

If I didn't want to stand out among those people...

My thoughts were interrupted when the designer of the dress shop approached me. "Have you decided on the color of your dress, Lady Floyen?"

I thought of a plain color that would satisfy my requirements. "I'd like my dress to be pink beige, please." Beige was something that wasn't going to be as noticeable amidst all the other fancier colors. That was probably why the designer looked dissatisfied with my answer.

“I honestly don’t think that color will stand out,” she warned.

“It doesn’t matter.”

She looked a bit taken aback by my response, but I didn’t care because I knew what I was going for. Still, if I made it too obvious that I didn’t care, there was a chance she would think me odd, so I made up a plausible reason to justify my choice and whispered it to her.

“Everyone else is choosing colorful dresses,” I began. “I don’t want to copy them.”

I spoke carefully, pretending I was a fashionable person of this era who just wanted to go against the grain. However, the designer remained skeptical and tried to dissuade me.

“Still, that color is a little...”

I knew what she wanted and replied with a smile. “Please make it out of the finest fabric and decorations,” I requested. If I went against Father’s wishes and ordered a cheap dress instead of an expensive one, then there was a chance that he was going to find out what my true intentions were. That was why I decided to ask for luxurious fabrics and decorations to commission an exorbitantly priced yet simple dress. Therefore, there was no longer any reason for the dress shop to refuse my order since I was being stubborn and had expressed my intention to pay well.

“I guess there’s nothing I can do,” the designer shrugged. “I’ll just have to do everything within my power to make you the star of this banquet, my lady.”

I smiled in satisfaction. The crown prince wouldn’t like my dress anyway, so it should be fine.



Meanwhile, the crown prince and his guards were taking a short break at an inn on their way to the capital. Although they were physically tired, the guards were full of excitement.

“About this banquet... will Lady Veronica from Count Terrence’s family be there?”

“Of course she’ll be there, you idiot. It’s a requirement for nobles to attend banquets hosted by the royal family.”

“What a relief. I’ve always liked her. I really want to take this opportunity to ask her for a dance.”

“I really want to tell Lady Rose that there’s no other lady who looks as good in pink as she does!”

As he listened to the conversation, Max imagined Jubelian in a dress. He supposed compliments like the ones the guards were ready to give would be meaningless to her, since every color suited her.

Dennis, the head of the guards, grinned joyfully as he watched the crown prince smile slightly. The fact that he smiled at a trivial conversation like this was a good sign.

The crown prince’s attendants thought their master would demand a huge quantity of funds or one of the royal family’s treasures that had been passed down generation after generation as a reward for his victory. That way, he could further fund the military or utilize the mysterious powers some treasures were said to contain. However, much to their surprise, the crown prince had asked the emperor for something far removed from their predictions.

“I’m going to ask the emperor to hold a victory banquet,” he had said.

Judging from the crown prince’s dislike of banquets, it was safe to say that this festival had been requested solely for the benefit of his subordinates. Who would have thought that His Highness would turn down rare valuables for a chance to hold a banquet for them instead? After many years of suffering on the battlefield, the majority of the knights had become mentally exhausted. Because of this, they couldn’t help but feel moved when they realized that their commander had done them a kind gesture.

Now that he was no longer lacking in terms of personality, the only thing that remained was... for His Highness to welcome a suitable partner.

With this in mind, Dennis struck up a conversation with the crown prince.

“Will you be attending this banquet as well, Your Highness?” he inquired amiably.

Max nodded. “Yes.”

Seeing the crown prince behave so contentedly, Dennis realized that now was his chance to ask what was on his mind. “Why don’t you take this opportunity to find yourself a romantic partner, Your Highness?”

Max’s face hardened and a frown settled on his lips when he heard the word *partner*. “What nonsense are you spouting? We have a rebellion planned ahead of us.”

“There are many advantages to a marriage, such as justifying an alliance under its name, for example. Even if you don’t get married right away, why don’t you take this chance to start looking?”

Dennis was right, but if Max were to become an emperor by gaining political strength through marriage, it would be as good as giving his prospective wife’s family free reign to intervene in political affairs. Because of this, Max planned to disclose that he had no intention to marry.

Before he could speak, however, Dennis continued. “It can be because you like the way they look, their personality, or you just feel comfortable with them,” he elaborated. “Anything is fine, so please consider that there might be a lady out there you may be interested in, Your Highness.”

At Dennis’ earnest request, Max’s face tensed. A certain someone came to mind just then. Jubelian. Of all the occasions he could’ve thought of, the first that came to mind was her wearing a white dress and asking him if it looked pretty on her. The image of her smiling at him with her eyes shining a brilliant, jewel-like shade of blue made his cheeks burn.

White would suit her very well...

No, he had to stop this. His future partner would become the next empress, so he had to consider the decision very carefully.

He quickly composed himself and carefully structured his standards, starting with appearance and extending to family and personality. Even so, no matter how much thought he gave it, Jubelian was the only one who satisfied

everything Dennis had mentioned. When he realized this, the unpleasant feeling he had strangely faded away.

Well... it was true that there was none more suitable than her to be his partner...

Max's lips gently began to curl up at the thought.

On the other hand, Dennis was starting to become wary of the sudden change in the crown prince's expression. Did he mention marriage a bit too early? Well, it wasn't a very appropriate thing to say with the rebellion right around the corner, he supposed.

On the battlefield, there were only two types of situations where the crown prince went from a straight face to a smiling face. The first was when he heard something funny and the second was whenever he beheaded an enemy. Based on this knowledge, Dennis tried to amend what he had said.

"Your Highness, it was presumptuous of me t—"

"I definitely agree with you."

Dennis was taken aback by his commander's abrupt claim. "I'm sorry?" he asked, dumbfounded.

Max leveled Dennis with a serious stare, his smile now gone from his face. "As you said, I'll look for her."

"What? Look for what...?"

Since his subordinate was apparently confused, the prince elaborated.

"My bride."



When I received the completed dress a few days later, I couldn't help the sigh that left my mouth. I definitely wanted a dress that wasn't too fancy, but the off-shoulder dress I got was made out of the finest fabric available and the most beautiful white mesh I could imagine. There was a subtle gloss to it, too, along

with a finely-sewn display of shiny beads.

This wasn't what I wanted...

The maids, unaware of my displeasure, exclaimed in excitement.

"Oh, it's gorgeous!"

"You're already beautiful, Lady Floyen, but if you wear this dress, no one in the banquet hall will be able to keep their eyes off of you!"

"I agree! I'm sure a lot of people will start asking you out!"

I frowned as I listened. I didn't want to look pretty to anyone, and I didn't want to go out with anyone, either...

I thought for a moment. Then, I recalled a certain someone's face and felt my heart ache.

Was Max ever going to come back? Was he down with an illness? What if something happened to him? I had speculated about a great many possibilities during his absence, and these worries had stirred up my anxiety.

"Did you know that I'm sick and tired of you?" Mikhail had once asked me.

Perhaps Max had left because he was tired of me, just like Mikhail had. I had no reason to cling to him like I had done with Mikhail, but I still felt empty and heartbroken by the prospect. His presence had been a big part of my life. He was the first friend I had ever made and was someone who accepted me for who I truly was.

I just wanted to know if he was safe... Ignoring the depressing thoughts in my head proved to be an exhausting feat and I slowly felt swamped with fatigue.

"Merilyn, could you put the dress in the closet and light some incense that'll help me sleep?" I asked.

Merilyn's eyes widened in surprise. "It's better if you avoid using the sleeping incense unless you really have to because of its side effects, my lady..."

"I've been so tired these days and I can't seem to sleep," I explained. "Do me a favor, please?"

Merilyn gazed at me with worry. Then, she sighed. "I'll light the incense as

you have requested,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“Sir Geraldine might come by,” she reminded me, “so I’ll let him know in advance that I’ve lit the incense.”

Oh, Father might be working until late today, then. No wonder he didn’t come to see the dress. Father had been working overtime frequently these days, so Geraldine stopped by my room on the days he wasn’t here to make sure there had been no mishaps. Maybe Geraldine was just trying to do his job and earn his salary. Or, maybe he was simply acting on his conscience, given that he was my cousin.

I nodded gently since I was already aware of this. “Okay, thank you.”

After Marilyn left the room, I fell back onto my bed. I inhaled the scent emanating from the incense and felt my eyelids start to droop. My mind became foggy. Its effect was indeed strong, just like the high society rumors had indicated.

Yes. I should just go to sleep.

I was in the midst of forgetting about my impractical thoughts through sleep when I heard a tapping sound. I shot up out of bed, startled. Did I just imagine that?

It was true that I had been exhausted because I had been too worried to sleep as of late, but I wondered if that was a good enough reason to explain why I might’ve started hallucinating things.

I should just ignore whatever it was and keep trying to sleep...

I went to lie down again when I suddenly heard the tapping sound once more. Hearing it a second time, I gulped nervously. It wasn’t... a pigeon... was it? Madam Perez said she would do something about them, but I wasn’t aware of whether or not she had yet to carry anything out yet.

Alright, even if she did do something, it might’ve been something like a scarecrow... which meant a particularly fearless pigeon could still try its luck if it so chose.

With this thought in mind, I warily approached the window only to find that there was nothing there. I guess I really was hearing things. I must've worked myself up over nothing. Disheartened, my legs unconsciously gave out.

When I was about to collapse on the floor, someone caught me.

"Oh, thanks," I said. Having expressed my gratitude, I tried to go back to bed, assuming that it had been Geraldine who had helped me up. The hand that held onto me didn't let me go, however.

"Dean?" I asked, using my cousin's nickname. I turned to check on him, but I froze in shock.

This man had fierce, familiar eyes. He had occupied my mind endlessly.

"And who's that?" Max demanded.

Suddenly, I recalled the side effects of the incense I had asked Marilyn to light. I heard that it worked well but could dull one's senses and intoxicate them. I was experiencing those side effects right now, weren't I? I was surely convinced of this, but then he spoke up again.

"Answer me, Jubelian!" he insisted. "Have you forgotten about our contract?"

Although the man before me could only be a hallucination, faced with his handsome face and familiar callousness, all the emotions that I had suppressed up until this point began to surge up inside me.



As a result of his endless urging to move faster, Max and his guards had reached the capital about two days earlier than expected. As soon as the knights stepped foot into their hideout, they passed out from exhaustion.

However, as the captain of the guards, Dennis couldn't afford to lose face, so he plopped down into a chair instead.

This is something that humans really shouldn't attempt, he thought.

At that moment, something caught his eye. The crown prince was preparing

to go out. Unlike everyone else who was sprawled out randomly, devoid of even the energy to wash up, Max had fixed himself up and he was upright.

“Where are you going, Your Highness?” Dennis asked.

“I need to pay a visit somewhere.”

Dennis was about to inquire as to where specifically, but before he could, Max leveled him with the most serious expression possible and asked, “How do I look today?”

He was dressed in a white shirt and black pants. Anyone who saw him would definitely say that he was an entrancing and handsome man.

He had grown up so well... Dennis, who almost let those praises slip, snapped his mouth shut. Now that he thought about it, he had asked the enemy a similar question before.

When Max had first entered the battlefield at a young age, he was frequently ridiculed by his foes for being young and having a delicate appearance.

“A teeny little girl has decided to step foot onto the battlefield wielding a needle for a sword!” the enemy would taunt. The crown prince made them pay for their mockery by beheading them.

I wasn’t sure why he’s asking me something like this, but... Dennis swallowed dryly, then realized that if he gave the wrong answer, his break would be over. Given how he naturally hated being looked down upon by others, what the crown prince wanted was clear.

“Y-You look very dignified, Your Highness!”

The prince’s forehead creased slightly at that answer. Dennis gulped nervously. Was that not the answer he wanted? Dennis put on his thinking cap and thought of other things that the crown prince might not want to hear.

Okay, he disliked compliments about his appearance especially, so it would be fine as long as Dennis avoided them.

Finished with his brainstorming, Dennis tried again. “You look so powerful, Your Highness!” he praised.

His words caused the crown prince’s expression to turn cold. “You keep saying

weird things,” he grunted.

Dennis stilled, frozen with fright at the crown prince’s chilly response.

Suddenly, the hideout manager popped into the room, chiming in with a grin. “You look handsome today, Your Highness!” he said. “Every woman on the street will swoon over you if you go out looking like that!”

Dennis inhaled sharply. Was he crazy? He just said something he shouldn’t: *handsome!* Dennis was as tense as he could get. The hideout manager had utilized a forbidden term...

“I’ll be back,” Max said.

Dennis watched, stupefied, as the crown prince finally left. What just happened? Did he eat something bad?



Having heard the answer he wanted to hear, Max left the hideout with a sense of relief coursing through him. He didn’t care if his subordinate thought strangely of him. He was sure Jubelian would welcome him.

With this thought motivating him, Max quickly made his way to her room. However, her reaction was quite different from what he had expected.

“What? Contract?” she hissed. “It’s been two months since we’ve last seen each other, and you’re talking about the contract?” The fierce look in her eyes was much more different than the one she normally wore, but what was more shocking was the way she spoke to him.

“You... did you just speak informally to me?” he asked.

It was the first time someone other than the emperor, empress, or his master had spoken to him in such a way. He had required Jubelian to speak to him formally in the past and thought she would quickly correct herself, but she didn’t, reacting bitterly instead.

“What? You spoke informally to me when we first met. Why can’t I do the same?” she challenged.

It wasn't that Max minded her speaking informally to him, he was just taken aback by her harsh, aggressive, and petty manner of speech. It was unlike her.

Well, amending that thought, she was known to have a terrible personality in the past. Max wondered if this was how she truly was, but the difference between this and her usual demeanor was much too drastic. Why on earth was she being like this?

Suddenly, Jubelian clenched her hands into fists and started pounding at his chest. "You should've at least sent a letter if you were okay!" she cried.

Her punches didn't hurt, but if someone else had tried this, they would've been slaughtered. Strangely enough, however, he wouldn't dare to think of doing such a thing to her. Instead, Max began to reflect on his actions, trying to assess the source of her distress.

He hadn't thought of trying to contact her like that. If he knew she was going to react like this, he would've at least tried to send her another carrier pigeon...

Jubelian glared at him. Her wavering blue eyes soon began to glisten with moisture. "I was so scared..." she murmured, distraught. "I-I thought that something might've happened to you..."

Max began to feel strange. She had tears in her eyes. Scared? She was scared for him?

He had participated in several wars over the years and all he had ever received in regards to them was awe and compliments expounding upon the glory of his victory. "*You're so magnificent, Your Highness!*" they would say. Even Fresia, who had been with him for a long time, would react similarly.

However...

"I thought something had happened to you on that mission you left for, or—or you had abandoned me because you were tired of—"

Overwhelmed by her grief, Jubelian stopped mid-sentence, choking out a sob. She covered her mouth with both hands as if to force her cries to cease, but tears continued to form, dampening her eyelashes and dripping from her big, clear blue eyes.

She was crying... did he upset her that much? She always seemed so nonchalant, so Max had never imagined she would break down like this. Now that he saw her like this, however, a part of him started to suffocate. His heart began to constrict unbearably.

Max was willing to do anything within his power to dry her tears.

At that moment, he recalled something she had once told him: *"In order to reconcile, someone needs to apologize first."*

Back then, he had apologized simply to avoid worsening the situation, but now, Max was truly remorseful.

"Don't cry," he said slowly. "I... I'm sorry."

Jubelian looked at him, her lips still trembling despite his apology. "You should be sorry! Do you think you've done a good job? Was it that hard to send me even a single letter?" she shouted.

Max sighed. From now on... he swore to remember to write a letter to her if he ended up having to leave for a while.

Her tear-streaked face concerned him. He pulled out the handkerchief she had given to him and gently said, "Here. Wipe your tears."

Her eyes widened at the sight of the handkerchief. She snatched it from him reproachfully. "How dare you try to earn credit with something I had given you..."

He couldn't deny it because she was right. When was she going to stop being angry? He sighed. She was certainly being rather difficult today.

"I'm sleepy," she muttered under her breath.

It had been a long time since they had last seen each other. How could she say that? Disappointment filled him, but he couldn't just leave her be when she was just standing there, blinking slowly and fluttering her long eyelashes.

"Go to bed if you're sleepy," Max sighed, resigned.

As soon as he finished speaking, Jubelian began to collapse. Max barely managed to catch her in time.

“Jubel—!”

He was about to call her name again, worried that something was wrong, but then he began to register her soft, regular breaths.

Max felt dispirited. He couldn't believe she actually went to sleep right away. Carrying her to bed, he carefully put her down, afraid to wake her. Her eyebrows furrowed slightly when he did so.

Max watched her peacefully slumbering form for a moment before unconsciously blushing when he noticed that Jubelian's clothes had become disheveled from all the fuss she had made. He hurriedly covered her with a blanket and turned away.

His sense of reason was going to fly out the window if he kept looking at her like this.

He should come back tomorrow. Max hastily turned away.

As soon as he did, however, Jubelian grabbed his hand. “Don't... go,” her quiet voice suddenly said.

Max gazed back at her, but she was still breathing evenly and her eyes were still closed.

Was she sleep talking? Her grip was weak enough for him to escape if she were to let go slightly, but Max didn't consider doing so.

You're the one who clearly told me not to leave, he mentally warned her. Then, he intertwined his long, masculine fingers with her petite, slender ones. The warmth that he felt from her touch spread through him, filling his heart. It overheated, beating passionately.

Max watched Jubelian's sleeping face for a little bit longer before slowly closing his eyes.



I saw Max in a dream for the first time in a while. Despite how I had been

worrying about him, he seemed perfectly fine. In that case, he could've sent me a letter telling me he was alright. That was why I had nagged his dream self, venting all my emotions. I had essentially snapped at him.

At first, I wasn't sure if it was a dream or not, but there was a reason why I was convinced that it was. If it wasn't a dream, then it wouldn't make sense for a person who was usually arrogant to get flustered and start meekly apologizing to me. At least I was able to relieve my stress by pouring my emotions out on him.

Waking up, I slowly opened my eyes.

Huh? No matter how hard I thought about it, the handsome face I now saw in front of me and the feeling of a hand holding tightly onto mine was definitely real. Wait, so none of that was a dream?

At that moment, I remembered the side effects of the incense and all of the unseemly things I had done to him. I had cried, complained, and even nagged at him! Even I had to admit that I had been a terrible nuisance. I couldn't believe this!

I wanted to kick my blankets out of embarrassment, but I couldn't free myself from his grasp. Judging from what I had done, I must've grabbed his hand, too. *Ah*, I felt so sorry for him.

Seeing him sleeping awkwardly on his stomach near the foot of my bed made me feel uncomfortable. "E-excuse me," I softly called out to him, but he didn't budge.

Oh my God. I tried to pinch my cheek, hoping none of this was real.

"What are you doing?" he suddenly asked. Having quickly opened his eyes, he took hold of my free hand, which was the one I used to pinch myself with.

Now that both of my hands were unexpectedly caught, all I could do was answer him quietly. "*Ah*, well... I feel like I'm having a terrible dream."

His eyebrows knitted at my words, and he let out a sigh. "Did you have a nightmare?"

No, I was pretty sure my reality was currently worse than a nightmare. I

couldn't bring myself to admit as such, though.

Max observed me. Then, his eyes curved as he suddenly smiled teasingly. "Don't worry," he assured me. "I'll be here for you from now on."

No, he really didn't have to be. Could he please just leave for now?

Nevertheless, he kept talking as if he had no intention to stop making fun of me. "I didn't know you missed me enough to start crying..."

I couldn't bear to listen to him any longer. "Why don't we have breakfast?!" I shouted.

He observed me for a bit before smirking. "So, what kind of nightmare did you have just now?" he asked.

If I told him the truth and admitted that I remembered everything I did yesterday, then I wouldn't be able to live it down, so I chose to make up something instead.

"The crown prince was in my dream," I lied.

"The crown prince... hasn't his reputation improved as of late?" he asked. I thought that he was someone who wasn't interested in worldly affairs, but it seemed like he had grown as a member of society since he was now expressing interest in the crown prince. However, despite being proud of him for this, I couldn't bring myself to agree.

Although people were saying he had changed, I still couldn't trust that his very being had become different. In the novel, the crown prince was described as an ambitious figure who sought the throne. It had been mentioned that he didn't hesitate to get rid of anyone, including his own family. If we had been in the modern era, then he could've been labeled a psychopath, which meant that if he found out how others viewed him, then it would be simple for him to deceive them about his true nature.

"A good public image doesn't say anything about their true personality," I stated matter-of-factly.

"What does that mean?" Max shot back, his expression hardening.

"I'm saying that I'm still scared of him," I confessed, revealing my feeble

thoughts.

He stiffened. "You're... still scared?"

He wore an unusual expression that I had recognized as having seen before. He looked just like he did on the day of Count Arlo's banquet, when he had appeared at the balcony and made me an empty promise.

Wait, this guy... I hope he wasn't going to say that he was going to punish the crown prince...

Concerned, I hurriedly changed the topic. "Anyway, where were you until now?"

"The battlefield," he answered absentmindedly.

The battlefield? I looked at him in surprise. Thinking it back over, I heard that the crown prince had started sending reinforcements to the south to begin preparations for war about two months ago, which was around when he left. Was he a part of that? I wondered about it as I studied him, noticing that his face had become slightly thinner. He definitely looked like he had been through a lot...

I unconsciously began to lift a hand to his face, but I quickly pulled it back once I realized what I had been doing.

What did I just try to do?! He watched me with an intensity as I averted my eyes in shame, assuming he had noticed. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I gingerly asked.

He let out a deep sigh then said, "Jubelian, I'm actually..."

I focused on his words just in case he was going to point out my odd behavior and scold me for it. Suddenly, however, he clamped his mouth shut. So, he didn't catch me? I thought I was in the clear for a moment, but then he started bringing up a person I didn't want to hear about even in passing.

"I heard the crown prince will be hosting a banquet soon. You're not thinking about not going, are you?"

Wait, he took all that time just to ask me this? A sense of gloom that I had been suppressing washed over me at the thought of meeting the crown prince.

I nodded helplessly and sighed with resignation. "You're right," I muttered. "All the nobles are required to attend... so I have to go even if I don't want to."

He gave me a gentle look when I finished speaking. Why? What did he want to say?

He stared at me for a long time before continuing. "What are you going to do if the crown prince asks you for a dance?" he asked slowly.

"Ask me for a dance? Don't ever mention such a terrible thing! Don't even joke about it!"

His head slowly began to droop. "Is that... how much you dislike him?"

While what he said had been too much to consider a joke, it was also true that I had reacted too seriously with my answer. Feeling a little embarrassed, I locked my arm around his and changed the topic.

"Let's stop talking about this," I suggested. "We should go wash up and have breakfast."

He sighed. "Okay."

For some reason, the arm which I was dragging him by had no strength to it. I guess he hadn't eaten very well for a while. I thought about what mercenaries might've eaten during the war and came to an obvious conclusion, knowing fully well that they usually cooked something themselves while camping or ate what was served to them. It was clear that either of those options had probably tasted terrible. I should buy him something delicious today.

With this in mind, I turned to him and asked, "Hey, is there anything you want to eat?"

"...Strawberry cake."

As soon as he said those words, I understood exactly what he meant. I was sure that he must've been stressed out the entire time he was away, craving something sweet. I decided to feed him some delicious food and buy him some new clothes.

"Okay. I'll get ready to go out, so please wait here for a minute!" I said cheerfully.



The empress was enjoying a cozy bit of tea time with her daughter for the first time in a while. “My little princess, I hear that you’ve finished preparing for your coming-of-age ceremony without encountering any problems,” she said.

“Yes, Mother.”

The empress’ face appeared caring, like a mother’s, as she briefly smiled at her daughter’s strange response. However, her mask collapsed in an instant.

“I hear that the people are shouting hurrahs everywhere the crown prince’s triumphal procession is passing through.” A threatening smirk soon settled on her face. “So, what I’m saying is... while you were hung up on preparing for a mere banquet, that rat has become recognized by the people as the next emperor!”

Beatrice felt like her heart was being torn apart, but she kept her emotions hidden and answered as calmly as usual. “Don’t worry, Mother,” she began. “Sooner or later, there will be another chance to turn the tables on him once mo—”

The empress suddenly threw her teacup and it went sailing through air. “All you’re doing right now is drinking this tea!” she shouted furiously. “How will you be able to turn the tables?”

“M-Mother!” Beatrice cried, startled and bewildered.

Despite her fright, however, her mother refused to cease her abusive speech.

“Am I wrong?” Empress Isabella seethed. “I wouldn’t have had to suffer like this if you had been born a boy in the first place!”

Beatrice bit the inside of her cheek. A boy. A boy! Upset and dejected, she would’ve yelled right then and there if she could. *Why did you give birth to me if you were going to treat me like this?!* she wanted to scream. It was like she was burning up from the inside out, but all she could do was grit her teeth and bear it.

If she could just overcome this crisis, then her mother would finally love her.

“Mother, what if I ruined Maximillian’s banquet?” she spat out.

The empress, still in the midst of her tantrum, paused and raised a brow at the idea. “What? How?”

“Think about who was in charge of this palace’s internal affairs while that idiot Maximillian was out on the battlefield,” Beatrice said softly. “The person who took responsibility would be one of the maids anyway, so there’s no reason for us to get blamed.”

The ends of the empress’ mouth began to curl up at Beatrice’s words. “My lovely Bea, you’re right. I’m positive that we’ll be able to spoil this banquet,” she said. Calming down, the empress went back to looking like a kind, benevolent mother.

The royal princess smiled crookedly. “Yes. The nobles, caring so much about appearances, will find fault in him.”



“It’s so sweet.”

Perhaps it was because this was his first time eating strawberry cake in a while, but his expression looked better than before. “Yes, it’s sweet and delicious,” I agreed.

He chuckled as if he was feeling much better. I smiled as I looked at him, then asked something that had been on my mind. “So, how have you been?”

Based on what he said, he had spent about two months on the battlefield. I was worried that he was hurt somewhere or was suffering from lingering trauma caused by the war.

He answered nonchalantly, however. “Good.”

His eyes still held a serious look to them, so I replied seriously, too. “Really?”

“Yes, I gained a lot from it,” he said, nodding. His face had relaxed slightly,

making me relieved. At the very least, he probably made a lot of money while he was away.

“I’m glad.”

At my answer, he trained his gentle eyes upon me and asked, “What about you?”

“What?”

He speared a strawberry with his fork. “I’m asking how you’ve been,” he clarified.

I gave him a brief summary of what had happened while he was gone. His expression remained indifferent through the parts about the tea tasting parties, but subtly changed when I mentioned Father.

“You’re saying that... Master is encouraging you to dress up for the crown prince’s banquet?”

“Yes,” I said with a deep sigh.

He propped his chin on his hand, focusing all of his attention on me. “So, what kind of dress did you get?” he asked.

It was strange. I didn’t know why, but it was embarrassing to look him straight in the eyes for some reason. Was it because it had been a while since I had last seen him? I lowered my gaze and stared at my teacup. I started to feel lighter when not looking at him.

“Ah, well, I went to a dress shop and discovered that everyone was ordering colorful dresses.”

“So?”

“So, I chose a color that was the opposite of that. Something that would be as unnoticeable as possible.”

“And what color is that?”

“Pink beige.”

“That would go well with black,” he mumbled quietly under his breath.

“What?”

His remark was rather unexpected. I didn't know what was going through his mind, but he had a mischievous look on his face.

"The crown prince might be wearing black armor. He might ask you to be his very first dance."

I was getting annoyed at him for saying whatever he wanted just because it wouldn't be his problem to deal with, but I managed to remain calm. I really didn't want to get upset over a trivial matter like this.

"I'll never be caught because I'm going to hide."

"I see," he said with a smirk. "That's a good idea."

My eyes widened as he suddenly started reaching for me. He brushed his index finger across my lips and when he pulled back, I noticed some white cream on his finger. That was when I realized I had been eating with cream stuck on my mouth.

Ah, I made a mistake...

"It'd be better that way, since you won't be showing him your clumsy side like this," he teased.

I knew I was clumsy, but how could he lecture me like that right in front of me?

"Stop making fun of..."

I decided to speak up about what he had done but I lost my train of thought after I saw him lick the cream he plucked from my lips off his finger. Astonished, I could only gape at him. What? Why did he lick it? I was about to point out his strange behavior, but then his eyes caught mine and I became tongue-tied. His gaze was as fierce as a predator observing his prey.

His voice pitched low. Threatening. "Make sure to hide well and stay out of his sight," he warned.



Max hated sweets, but the sweetness he tasted upon the tip of his tongue was quite pleasant. Perhaps it was because the cream had touched her lips. Would she be angry or embarrassed? After witnessing a huge change in her emotions yesterday, vivid memories of her crying face and complaining voice kept haunting his mind. At first, he was taken aback by her foreign expressions, but now he found them quite entertaining. Max was secretly hoping to agitate her like he had last night.

Her cherry-hued lips soon parted. "I was thinking about doing that anyway," she huffed in a clear, ringing voice.

Contrary to what he had wished for, Jubelian simply frowned slightly, unfortunately remaining unruffled.

Despite her reaction, Max wasn't disappointed. He was glad she agreed to hide, at least. He started feeling a bit down when she talked about her new dress because whenever he imagined other people seeing her in it, an unpleasant feeling would crawl out from within him.

If he could, he would've liked to tell her the truth. He had thought about revealing his identity for a moment, then he gave up on the idea, afraid that the trust he had built up with her until now was all going to crumble down if she had a logical reason for being scared of the crown prince.

It wasn't the right time yet, but he had no intention of giving up on revealing his identity. First of all, he needed her to leave the ballroom during the banquet so that they could be alone. Then, he was going to clear up any misconceptions she had about him. Max decided that he was going to meet her in an isolated location where she couldn't escape and prove to her that he, as the crown prince, was harmless.

Just as he had expected, Jubelian easily disclosed to him what she was going to wear and what she was going to do at the banquet, unaware that he was the very same person she wanted to avoid so much.

The only thing left to do was pick a place. Max concealed his intentions and feigned indifference. "Where are you going to hide?" he asked.

"The terrace," Jubelian answered easily. She hadn't doubted him in the slightest.

Max frowned. That wasn't good. Since it was part of the banquet hall, they could stand out if they stayed there. He knew people were going to cause a ruckus the moment someone caught sight of the crown prince entering the same terrace she occupied, and judging from what he knew of her personality, Max inferred she wouldn't want that kind of attention. Furthermore, if the emperor or empress noticed, then they would definitely try to use Jubelian to their advantage.

For these reasons, Max thought of a better place in the imperial palace to pick. Somewhere often went unnoticed and unpopulated.

"Isn't that too boring?" he prompted.

"Then what would you consider a hiding place that wasn't boring?"

Max smirked, satisfied that Jubelian took the bait as soon as he threw it. "I'm told that the palace has several places called a lounge."

She nodded. "Ah, I see."

Now, he needed to guide her to the answer he was looking for. "The lounge at the end of the hall will probably be the quietest."

At that moment, her brows pinched and she gave him a look. It was the same look she had given him when he first met her at the store. "How do you know that when you've never been there?"

She was doubting him. Good. It relieved him a bit when she regarded him sharply like that from time to time.

Max sliced the piece of cake in front of him with his fork. "I overheard the imperial knights talking about it on the battlefield," he lied calmly. "They say that it's the perfect place for a nap since it's quiet there. I'm telling you this because I don't think anyone would be there during a banquet."

Jubelian was quietly listening to him. She lowered her eyes slightly and stared at her teacup in thought. Then, she took a sip of tea.

"I'll take that into consideration," she said.

Max watched her, unable to take his eyes off her for some reason. She slowly lifted her own to return his gaze. There was still a sense of doubt lingering

there.

Now he just needed her to realize who he was... before he got to tell her. He was afraid that she would find out, but at the same time, his wish for her to notice was even stronger. An atrocious impulse flashed through his mind. Should he just kidnap her and tell her he was the crown prince?

At that moment, Jubelian frowned slightly as if she had become aware of his evil thoughts. “You actually don’t know anything and are just joking with me, aren’t you?”

Max had assumed she was getting close to the truth, but when he heard her say that, he became discouraged. He had given her quite a few hints, but she kept making all the wrong assumptions.

I guess... this is more like you, though, he mused to himself.

Max tried to maintain his composure like he did in front of others, but he could no longer hold back the laughter rising inside him.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked, pouting. “Were you actually joking?”

Max glanced at her and realized that his heart was beating wildly.

It was too late to try to run away, anyway. After numerous denials, Max finally decided to admit to himself that he couldn’t escape from her.



On the carriage ride home, I glared with discontent at Max’s handsome face. It had been a while since we had seen each other, but all he did today was joke around... we definitely shopped, ate cake, and had some other delicious foods, but oddly enough, I kept feeling down. I was sure this was all because Max had been spouting nonsense.

Then, I spotted the Floyen mansion in the distance. I was already home...

I gladly invited him to stay at our mansion if he had nowhere else to go, but he simply told me that there were some people he still owed a visit to, so he

couldn't come. I was lost in thought when he broke the silence that had descended between us, bringing me back to reality.

"Jubelian," he called.

Before I knew it, the distant mansion had become increasingly nearer. It was now time to say goodbye. I was unconsciously about to sigh, but then he spoke as if he was giving me prior notice.

"I won't be able to come back for a while."

I didn't know if *a while* meant three days, a week, or two months like it did last time. I couldn't fathom what his definition of *a while* was, but the thought that he might grow tired of me if I clung onto him and asked about it hurt me. Instead, I responded calmly, frightened of losing the very first friend I had made.

"Really? When will you be back?" I asked. I was still curious, so I tried asking in the most casual tone I could manage.

He hesitated. "I'll be back after the victory banquet," he said slowly.

The victory banquet hosted by the crown prince was scheduled to take place in eighteen days. I was a little disappointed, but I chose not to show how I felt. "Okay," I said. "Promise me that you'll stay healthy and keep well until then."

He smiled. "I will."

He was someone who normally didn't smile too much, but, for some reason, he had been doing it a lot today. What a pleasing sight to see.

Although this was a contractual relationship, it was true that I always had a lot of fun when he was around. My heart even fluttered at times. It was like he was the handsomest man in the world.

Still, there was no way that he held any romantic interest in me. I didn't have any intention of dating him seriously, either. I didn't want our friendship to become awkward and I didn't want to develop a crush on someone I never had any chance with.

I firmly engraved my choice to stay as friends into my mind.

"Let's get off now," he said. We had arrived.

He left the carriage first and I rose to exit after him, reaching out to him for help stepping down. Was it because it had been two months? This felt weird, too.

“Jubelian,” he called again.

“Yes?” I answered.

“Can I say goodbye to you properly?”

“Of course.”

I replied without much thought. I assumed a proper goodbye meant that he was going to bow to me, but instead he slowly tilted his head, lifting the back of my hand to his lips. Was he trying to kiss it? He held my hand loosely, which meant I could remove myself from his grip any time I wanted to. Even so, I stayed still and simply watched what he would do.

His long eyelashes, his sharp nose, and his mouth were beautiful. Soon enough, I felt his soft lips briefly press themselves against the back of my hand before gently retreating. This gesture had felt terribly unpleasant when Radian had done it, but it didn’t feel as unpleasant now.

“I’ll see you then,” he murmured gently.

“Okay,” I nodded.

Then, he swiftly disappeared from my sight. I inspected the direction he retreated to before looking down at the back of my hand. Was it because he was handsome? I felt like a princess who had just received a kiss from her prince.

I was caught up in my embarrassment for a moment, but quickly collected myself.

Stop. I shouldn’t be doing this.

If I realized that someone I thought of as a friend possessed an ulterior motive when they were around me, I would feel betrayed. If I fell for him now and chased after him, bothering him like I did Mikhail, then I was going to lose a very precious friend.

“Wake up,” I muttered aloud to myself. “He doesn’t like people like me.”

The excitement that I had felt subsided when I recited this mantra to get myself together. Yes. My goal was to live a safe life. I needed to get it together.

Suddenly, I heard a voice.

“Jubelian.”

Startled, I turned around to see Father gazing at me. Did he hear what I was saying to myself just now? Nervousness took hold of me as the fear of him finding out that Max and I were in a contractual relationship crashed into me.

However, he simply reached for me and said, “Let’s go in.”

A heavy warmth similar to that of Max’s met me when I took the hand Father offered. I wasn’t sure if I should be relieved or if he was merely pretending that he hadn’t heard me, but Father didn’t say anything about what had transpired so I couldn’t do much about it.

I had lowered my guard when I heard him speak up. “I see that Max is back,” he commented.

“Oh, yes, he is! I’m so happy!”

I exaggerated on purpose, thinking that Father might stop trying to set me up with the crown prince if I did so. However, his response was different from what I expected.

“How long do you intend to dwell on such informal meetings with him?”

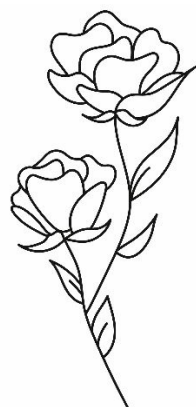
“Ah, well...”

Was he telling me to meet Max with confidence? I wasn’t sure what he meant at first, but his next statement clarified things for me.

“I would rather have you dance confidently at the banquet hall with the crown prince.”

I sighed. That was never going to happen because I wouldn’t be at the ballroom. I devised a plan to destroy Father’s useless hopes for a moment. Then, I thought of Max’s face and smiled.

I hope the banquet passes by quickly...



Smooth Sailing

The people of the empire cheered when they saw the crown prince's black armor at the vanguard of the triumphal procession. Everywhere the procession went came shouts of celebratory awe.

"Wow, his bravery perfectly matches his status as a hero!"

"No one else would've been able to cut through the enemy lines and behead the enemy's commander like he did!"

People lavished praise on the crown prince, as his achievements were perceived to be on the level of Duke Floyen's, the empire's hero.

Eventually, the triumphant procession reached the imperial palace.

The emperor watched with vigilant eyes as his son entered his office. Nevertheless, he couldn't see his son's expression since it was concealed by a helmet. Now that the crown prince had made a great contribution to the nation, the nobles would create an even greater outcry. The emperor was in the midst of contemplating a means of dealing with his son, afraid that he would seize this chance to steal the throne.

The emperor still had Duke Floyen on his side, in the rare case that Max decided to run astray...

He gave his son a dreary look. Maximillian was in his immediate vicinity.

The crown prince's black armor was perceived by the public as a symbol of victory, but to the emperor's eyes, it only looked ominous. The emperor suppressed his fear and welcomed the crown prince with a generous voice. "Welcome, Crown Prince. You've done a great job defending the south," he said.

Maximillian lowered his head at the emperor's greetings. "It's all thanks to your arrangements, Your Majesty."

The emperor had been worried about his son acting impudently against him

like the last time they met, but upon hearing the prince's acceptable response, he relaxed. "My son, aren't you going to show your father your face?"

The crown prince replied with a polite nod. "Unfortunately, I've come a long way, and I'm not currently presentable as of this moment, Your Majesty. I'd appreciate it if you could generously overlook this."

"I guess there's nothing we can do, then," he reluctantly supplied. Although the crown prince had respectfully denied his request, he wore an unpleasant expression upon his face. It was as if the rejection had offended him.

At that moment, the crown prince praised the emperor once more. "I'd like to express my thanks for approving of the victory banquet again."

The emperor's face brightened at this display of gratitude. "Of course," he said. "I guess you should start preparing for the banquet now. There will be a lot to do, as we're only about a fortnight away from it."

"Yes, that's right."

"You won't have to worry much about it as I've already informed Countess Roas, the head maid, to make some excellent preparations."

The crown prince hesitated for a moment, then opened his mouth. "If possible, I'd like to change the person in charge. Will that be okay?"

The emperor nodded magnanimously at his son's words. "I see. You must have someone in mind. Tell me who it is," he probed.

"It bothers me that the victory banquet is being held so close to my sister's coming-of-age ceremony," the crown prince began.

"Hm... that is definitely true," the emperor replied indifferently at the mention of his daughter. He had never paid attention to her before. His response was purposefully lukewarm, but the crown prince remained calm.

"I would like to request for my sister Beatrice to be in charge of this banquet. It will become a wondrous achievement for her if she successfully hosts it, and it will put her back in the spotlight during her coming-of-age ceremony."

The emperor tried to put his brain to work at the suggestion. The empress had certainly been a bit of a nuisance lately... he thought about the curtain

lectures his wife had given him. Then, he nodded. "Okay, I'll have the princess organize the victory banquet, then," he said. "You can discuss the details of the event with her."

The crown prince bowed. "Thank you for granting this request as well, Your Majesty."

The emperor smiled, satisfied now that his son, who was previously frustratingly hostile, was now civil with him. He let out a hearty laugh. "Don't mention it. You must be tired. Why don't you go to your room and rest up?"

Upon receiving the emperor's permission, the crown prince rose and bowed deeply. "Thank you for your consideration. I will do just that."

The crown prince began to make his way out of the office. The emperor watched him leave. "I see that you've finally learned your place," he murmured. He was relieved to witness his troublesome son's newfound obedience.

Meanwhile, the crown prince, having returned to his room, shooed his servants away with a wave of his hand. "Everyone may leave. I'll change on my own," he said.

Once all the servants left, he was about to remove his helmet before someone emerged from behind a curtain.

"What did the emperor say?" an arrogant voice questioned. He talked down as if to address a subordinate.

Instead of becoming angry, the crown prince knelt on one knee out of courtesy. "It was as you thought. He granted permission to have the princess be in charge of the banquet," he reported.

"Good."

If the princess planned and hosted a successful banquet, she was surely going to be praised by the people. On the other hand, if she were to make a mistake, she would be the one held responsible for it. Now that sly woman wouldn't be able to manipulate anything.

He reflected on his successful plan for a moment then glanced at the uncomfortable crown prince. "You may take off your helmet now."

The man in the armor removed his helmet and held it to the side, revealing that he was, in fact, not the prince. Victor deferred to the man before him. Unlike the armor he wore, the real crown prince was dressed in a simple white shirt, wearing a comfortable expression on his face.

“In the future, I hope you will do this yourself, Your Highness,” Victor sighed. “At least for when you have an audience with the emperor. I almost got caught today.”

A corner of Max’s mouth quirked at his subordinate’s mildly resentful tone. “What’s wrong? He has no clue whether or not whoever wears that armor is his child.”

“But...”

“Don’t argue with me anymore. I have no intention of bowing to him.”

Victor already felt sick to his stomach from the pressure of having to act in front of the emperor today, yet he was told to undergo the act once more... it felt like he was suffering unfairly. Wasn’t this too much? Max tells him to wear the armor every day...

Max smiled, ignorant of Victor’s thoughts. “You won’t get caught unless you take off the helmet, so don’t worry.”

Victor hung his head helplessly. “Yes, Your Highness.”



The banquet will be a masquerade. Other than that, you can do as you please.

Beatrice crumpled up the proposal for the banquet she received from her stepbrother and began muttering furiously. “Maximillian...!” she seethed.

She had no idea that Maximillian would leave her in charge of the preparations for the banquet as she had certainly not dropped any hints about her plan. This meant that it was impossible to try to ruin this banquet since she was now involved in it as well. Beatrice started to nervously throw things around when she realized what had happened.

“Is this good-for-nothing trying to use me?!” she screamed.

The royal princess stomped past the frightened maids, opened a liquor bottle, and gulped down its contents. Her red eyes soon became hazy with madness.

Wait a minute! She could make him look like a madman without even ruining the banquet!



I had hoped for the banquet to pass by quickly, but that wasn't the case. The time until then had felt quite long. Ah, I was sick of this. I couldn't believe I had to do this again in two weeks... I felt dejected at the thought.

“You're beautiful, my lady!” Merilyn gushed.

“Merilyn is right. You'll stand out the most at the banquet today!” another maid agreed.

Since my plan was actually to avoid standing out, I couldn't help but find their praises disturbing. “Oh, stop it. There will be plenty of other beautiful women there,” I sighed, observing myself in the mirror.

Although my dress was definitely not a rather subtle color, it was delicate and lovely overall, which made me fear that it might draw attention. I hoped I wouldn't stand out to the crown prince. Sighing again, I began to worry.

“Are you all set, my lady?”

I stood up at the sound of Derrick's voice coming from outside the door. At that moment, the maids all turned toward me.

“Be confident, my lady.”

“Yes, please be confident. I'm not just saying empty words. You look very beautiful today. I'm sure you'll stand out the most at the banquet!” one added.

Please stop saying ominous things. Honestly, they were making me worried. I couldn't happily accept their compliments because of my current situation. However, since there was a chance I could hurt their feelings if I denied them, I

forced a weak smile. "Okay," I nodded, "thank you for the praise."

The maids smiled brightly and opened the door for me. Father said he would escort me today, right? I didn't want to take another step, but I trudged forward anyway. All I had to do now was go downstairs to where Father would be waiting.

Ah, I really didn't want to go. I lamented the concept of forced attendance.

"Jubelian." Father made his way to the stairs. He stood in front of them, extending a hand out to me.

He looked handsome today, like he always did. This was why he still garnered attention from other noblewomen. It would be great if he got remarried soon.

I was filled with useless hope for a moment, but then I let go of the thought, slowly approaching him and taking a hold of his hand. A brilliant smile appeared upon his already glowing face.

"You look very beautiful today," he commented.

I hadn't expected him to smile, much less compliment me. I normally viewed compliments about my appearance as acts of courtesy, but I felt strange about Father's gentle admission. This was the first time he had ever praised my appearance like this. A sense of embarrassment started to encroach upon me, but then Father's lips, which were drawn into a soft curve, parted to speak.

"I'm sure the crown prince will be happy to see you as well."

I became sullen when I realized the true reason he had complimented me. Oh. He was pleased that I looked acceptable for the crown prince. I hadn't expected to hear a flattering comment like 'my beautiful princess' or anything since we weren't close. In fact, compared to the relationship between people who weren't even family, our relationship was much worse. Still, I couldn't help but feel disappointed because it was true that the thought of him thinking of me as his lovely daughter both moved and overjoyed me.

It was just as I thought. I shouldn't have entertained such useless expectations.

"Let's go," he said. The hand that slowly led me forward extremely warm,

which only made me bitter. I sighed, hoping that the day would pass by quickly.



Max admired his appearance in the mirror. This was good enough. Everything seemed to be smooth sailing so far.

Suddenly, the letter that he failed to deliver to Jubelian caught his eye. He should probably take it with him as well... just in case.

A voice came from outside the door as Max picked up the letter. "We really have to get going now, Your Royal Highness."

Max sighed and put on a mask to cover his face. Even with the mask on, he still looked acceptable, which made him glad that he took the time to dress up.

Max clenched his fists, full of determination. Today he was going to make sure to clear up all of Jubelian's misunderstandings.



When I peeked out the window, I saw a long procession of carriages stretching from the gates of the palace. It had been a long time since I had been here. Around six months, actually. I had avoided it after I learned about the details of Jubelian's past life.

Although it was a building that held nothing but terrible memories for me, it was extremely magnificent and beautiful. As expected of the place where the emperor himself resided.

I used to possess the immature desire to live here when I was younger. Upon recalling that thought, I caught a brief glimpse of Father before turning my attention back to the scenery outside the window.

Now that I thought about it, to live here, I would have to become the crown princess or become the royal princess' maid, which were both outlandish ideas.

I guess it was a good thing that I gave up on that desire early on.

Suddenly, I recalled that it was the royal princess who was overseeing this banquet. Would she be attending it, too? Just thinking about having to keep two people in check made me tired, but thankfully, those thoughts were short-lived. There was a good chance that she wouldn't be at the banquet since her coming-of-age ceremony would be held in two weeks.

The once in a lifetime coming-of-age ceremony was considered an extremely important event in high society. Many aristocratic women would agonize over how they could stand out the most on that day, and such an important event was to be held in just two weeks. This meant that the royal princess, who had never shown her face in public before, had no reason to attend the victory banquet held to celebrate her stepbrother's achievements. It was well-known that the two were not on good terms with each other.

That meant I would see her in two weeks, so it would be fine. The royal princess was the second-most person I desperately wanted to avoid after the crown prince, but I hadn't worried about her much lately because I wasn't going to run into her unless I caused a commotion somehow. The crown prince was the real problem.

All aristocrats bearing titles were obligated to attend, which meant that the banquet hall was bound to be crowded. However, it was going to be difficult to slip out of Father's field of view even if I attempted to escape amidst the confusion. I would have to find a way around somehow. While I pondered over how to escape the banquet hall, Father suddenly spoke.

"Don't worry too much," he assured me with a warm voice. I stared at him in surprise. What was he trying to say? An ominous feeling shot through me after Father smiled handsomely at me and said, "The crown prince will only have eyes for you."

I had expected him to say something about the crown prince, but didn't think that he was going to openly express his greedy ambitions like that. Why was he being mean? It was an undeniable fact that I had a boyfriend already! Although it was a contractual relationship, that didn't change the fact that Father thought that Max and I were dating. Despite that, he kept mentioning the crown prince,

which made me uncomfortable.

I couldn't stand his actions any longer, so I decided to speak up.

"I disagree with you, Father. Many people have probably dressed up in fancy, flattering attire in order to get noticed by the new hero," I said. It was more of a roundabout statement than a direct rebuttal, but I still denied his words about catching the crown prince's attention. Father looked surprised, as if he was taken aback by my unexpected defiance. However, his gaze gradually turned cold.

Was he angry? I wondered what I should do now, but, for some reason, I didn't feel like giving in to Father's power plays today. I guess I couldn't help it. If one thing went even slightly wrong today, then my life was over.

I made up my mind, and at that moment, the carriage finally came to a halt. For a while now, it moved rather slowly, almost as if trudging along in a crawl.

Shortly afterwards, the door opened.

"Let's get off," Father said, offering me his hand. I stared at it, hesitating for a bit before grabbing ahold of it.



Was Jubelian okay? Regis watched as his daughter walked feebly beside him then slowly lifted his gaze to the imperial palace. At the sight of the building, his blue eyes filled with bitterness, transforming his gaze into something akin to the biting midwinter wind.

Max, that contemptible wretch...

His daughter, who had been depressed while his disciple was away, had come to the conclusion that the crown prince wouldn't like her. Regis couldn't believe he didn't even do anything to reassure her, yet he still dared to go on about being her lover.

Regis didn't even care if the victory banquet was currently taking place. If he could, he would've quit this act and taken his daughter home immediately.

However, there was a reason why he was being patient and forgoing his true desires.

Jubelian must've been looking forward to today's banquet. Despite her denial, his daughter's eyes had remained fixed on the palace, almost as if she was coping with a lingering attachment to the crown prince. He didn't know why she was so concerned about what a worthless guy like him would think of her when she was flawless, lacking nothing. Even objectively speaking, his daughter was very beautiful. She also had a ton of virtues, so much so that he couldn't count them all.

All the noblemen would be in attendance at the banquet today, so he needed to start looking for...

Regis' eyes flashed fiercely in the midst of his thought. Something just occurred to him: he was certain that many useless men would try to approach his daughter. Determined to protect her today, Regis tightened his hold on her hand.



I glanced at my hand being held captive in Father's hand and sighed. It didn't hurt, but his strong, unyielding grasp made me think it was going to be difficult to shake him off. Was he keeping his eye on me so I wouldn't run off?

I was immersed in my gloomy thoughts, when I suddenly heard a sonorous voice ring out.

"Duke Regis Adrey Floyen and his daughter, Lady Jubelian Eloy Floyen are now entering."

I realized that it had been two years since the royal family had hosted a mandatory banquet like this. An unfamiliar feeling washed over me when we were referred to as people of a lower status since we were always greeted with polite words upon attending banquets hosted by others. I suppose the person announcing the guests' arrival was taking into consideration the fact that the royal family were the ones listening to his welcoming announcements.

I stepped foot inside the banquet hall. Even after having to accommodate all of the empire's nobility and the knights who had participated in the war, it was still spacious.

This just demonstrates precisely how big the palace actually was...

It looked difficult to navigate. Others might praise this place, saying it represented the majesty of the great empire of Assiette, but for me, it was a useless wide-open space with hiding places that were way too difficult to find. I was going to get noticed if I tried to head to the terrace.

At that moment, my hand, which I thought was going to be arrested in Father's grip for the whole day, was released. Huh? I glanced at Father to see that he was doing, only to find him looking straight ahead with chilling eyes.

"Stay alert. And, if possible, don't raise your head," he warned.

I followed Father's gaze and looked to the front to see two people sitting in the seats of honor, located at a place situated higher than the rest of the banquet hall. The man had on a long cape decorated with sable fur and the woman looked glamorous, adorned in a showy golden dress. The luxurious crowns on their heads denoted their status. I realized only then why Father had warned me as such, and I lowered my eyes.

"I, Duke Regis Adrey Floyen, greet the Sun and Moon of this empire."

Mimicking Father's actions, I also greeted them as was customary. "I, Jubelian Eloy Floyen of the Floyen household, greet the Sun and Moon shining down on this empire."

"I'm glad you were able to grace this occasion with your presence, Regis," the emperor said, his voice immensely solemn.

"It would be only natural to attend such a joyous occasion for the empire," Father replied.

The emperor erupted into a hearty laugh as if satisfied by Father's answer. "Come to think of it," he began, "isn't your daughter also coming of age soon?"

Since he was asking about me, I started wondering if I should answer, but then I heard Father respond.

“Yes, her coming-of-age ceremony will be held in three months.”

I kept my head down, but could feel the emperor’s eyes trained on me.

“I see, why don’t you look up for a—”

At that moment, a middle-aged man who looked to be the grand chamberlain approached the emperor. He whispered something to the emperor, who clicked his tongue in return. “The crown prince will be entering soon, so I’ll have to get ready to welcome him,” he said. “I hope you have a good time.”

This was effectively a dismissal and I felt relieved. Thank God. Although he seemed to have an easy-going personality, the emperor was actually a man who possessed an inferiority complex directed toward his own son. Meanwhile, the empress had a twisted sense of motherly love and, as a result, emotionally abused her daughter.

Nonetheless, people thought this novel was a gratifying one. As of this moment, the plot was rather stifling, but later on, Beatrice, the heroine, was going to awaken as a wizard and bring forth a parade of satisfactions. Even though she was almost assassinated by someone in the final publication of the series, she was able to save herself despite being poisoned. In the end, even if she were to come into conflict with her parents, she would remain safe and emerge victorious.

However, it was a completely different case for me. I was the scapegoat and a foil used to provide a contrast to Beatrice’s glory. If those lowlifes found fault with me, it was only going to add more problems to my already troublesome life. For this reason, I left with my head held as low as possible. I had to be careful to not be seen by them from now on. This was a resolution I made sure to repeat to myself.

At that moment, an announcement rang through the banquet hall: “Here comes Crown Prince Maximillian Casein Assiette, the star of today’s banquet and the hero who brought victory to our empire in the war with Lagon.”

Everyone focused their attention on the entrance to the banquet hall. The people must’ve expected him to be dressed in colorful clothing because they seemed taken aback by the sight of the prince wearing a simple black dress suit.

“Huh? A black robe for a wonderful event?”

“He must really like that color to apply it to both his armor and dress suit.”

The crown prince who would attempt to torture me in another future had come. I slowly looked him over. The man in all black had broad shoulders and a strong yet slender build. The only thing that disappointed me was that I couldn't see his face because it was covered by a mask.

“I wonder why he's wearing a mask,” someone commented.

I was going to try to avoid him by remembering his face... but now that plan is ruined.

“Jubelian,” Father suddenly called.

“Yes?”

“Your friends are looking at you,” he said, gesturing with his eyes.

I shifted my gaze a bit, finding my fellow tea tasting party members all gathered in one place. They were trying to get my attention, it seemed.

Father urged me forward. “Go ahead.”

I had no idea he was going to let me go that easily. It caught me off guard, but I had no intention of kicking away an opportunity once freely given.

“Thank you, Father,” I said.

He nodded once. Then, he turned his back on me.

. I was fortunate enough to have Father's surveillance lifted off of me... now to go have a bit of a chat before leaving the banquet hall.

With a satisfied smile, I made my way toward the members of the tea tasting party.



When he entered the banquet hall, Max realized that his stepsister had pulled an amusing trick on him. This event was everything but a masquerade. She

must've been trying to humiliate him, but that didn't matter. Unfortunately for her, Max wasn't interested in what others thought about him because he had already been a long-time victim of a multitude of fake rumors. There was only one person he was concerned about at this moment.

There. He spotted her. Jubelian.

The purpose of holding a masquerade in the first place was to prevent Jubelian from finding out that he was the crown prince. Max watched her for a moment. Then, he frowned. She said she wasn't going to stand out, but she certainly did. He couldn't spot her immediately —probably because of the color of her dress—but once she caught his attention, he couldn't take his eyes off her. The worthless men hanging around her proved his thoughts to be true.

Max glared at the hungry vultures eyeing her up, gritting his teeth.

How dare those rubbish things lay their filthy gazes upon her...

If he could, he would've gone over and asked Jubelian to dance with him, giving the noblemen who were hovering around her a warning.

However, that was the moment the emperor annoyingly decided to strike up a conversation with him. "Why are you covering your face?" he asked. "Won't the nobles whisper about you if you wear a mask on a day like this?"

When Max was about to answer, the empress took that opportunity to interject. "The crown prince doesn't seem very informed on the subject of proper attire due to his extended presence on the battlefield, Your Majesty. Please be considerate of him."

Max's gaze turned cold at his stepmother's words. She was disparaging him under the guise of being benevolent. If he asked Jubelian to dance with him... she would only stand out to these trashy people.

Should he twist their heads off right now? Max's thoughts began to stay. He didn't see the problem in killing them right at that moment, and brutal impulses began to engulf him. When his gaze fell upon Jubelian once more, however, he changed his mind in an instant. No, he needed to show her that he wasn't a scary person, and murdering his parents right in front of her would definitely make that task a harder one to accomplish.

Just then, he noticed some nobles approaching as if to greet him. Max's mouth quirked into a mischievous smirk. Well, he should at least reciprocate his mother's sentiment, he supposed.

"Ah, this mask is a surprise gift from my sister," Max stated, answering his father's inquiry right when the nobles nearby were about to greet him. They became startled by his words, and the empress' eyes shook with a burgeoning fury.

"What do you mean that mask is a gift?" the emperor asked.

"I had clearly informed my sister of my intention to make this banquet a masquerade, but once I entered, I discovered that I was the only one wearing a mask. So, I assumed she was playing a little prank on me. She was, wasn't she?"

The empress forced a smile on her face and spoke through gritted teeth. "Our princess has prepared for this banquet perfectly, Crown Prince. Moreover, there is no way she would mess around with one of our empire's major events like this."

Max's eyes gleamed at her response. "Ah, she must've made a mistake, then. I understand."

The empress' expression hardened coldly. Even if she were to say her daughter had made a mistake, it didn't change the fact that the heart of a banquet was its concept. If she were to willingly accept the crown prince's claim, then her daughter was going to be criticized for her blunder. However, she couldn't admit that it was a prank, either, for that would mean that her daughter had intentionally ruined one of the palace's most important events for a petty purpose.

The empress took a few deep breaths to calm herself. She didn't expect the crown prince to talk back to her so openly like this because he had not responded to her numerous assassination attempts or the malicious rumors she spread about him. Nevertheless, if she stayed quiet, then the princess' immaculate image would be tarnished.

She had no choice but to say that she was the one who did it. She needed to talk herself out of trouble for now.

The empress was about to open her mouth to execute her plan, but the crown prince spoke up before she could. “Whether it was a prank or a mistake, I still enjoyed this surprise gift,” he shrugged. “Either way, it shows that my sister cares about me. Therefore, I’m going to keep the mask on.”

The empress squinted her eyes at the crown prince. He had unexpectedly smoothed things over for her. At first glance, it seemed that he was trying to cover up this incident, however...

“You’re so generous, Your Highness,” said one of the nobles around them.

“I agree,” chimed another. “To embrace your sister’s mistake like that!”

Before she realized it, the nobles were praising the crown prince for his generosity. The atmosphere surrounding them had immediately changed and now it seemed like no matter what he did, people were going to praise him. Unable to stand this ambience, the empress forced another smile on her lips and stood up. “I’m glad you’re enjoying the banquet the princess has prepared. I’ll have to leave for a moment to freshen up as my clothes seem have become a little rumpled.”

“Go ahead.”

Max watched the empress with eyes full of ridicule as she retreated, disappearing from sight. Thanks to the fact that he had refrained from retaliating against her schemes until now, the empress had assumed he was a foolish mute hardly capable of defending himself. She hadn’t been watching him with enough vigilance.

Stupid woman.

He didn’t put off dealing with her because he was afraid. He was waiting for the right moment to strike.

Max resumed his focus on Jubelian. He had intentionally made himself look generous even though it had been bothersome, but she hadn’t even looked in his direction. Upon that realization, he felt bitter. How frustrating. He sighed, having never felt this frustrated before.

At that moment, a sudden thought came to mind. She might look his way if he removed his mask.



I witnessed the quarrel that had transpired and came to a conclusion: everything had been totally intentional. I could tell because of the knowledge I had accrued throughout my experiences in a variety of part-time jobs in my past life. He seemed generous and forgiving on the surface, but he was adeptly screwing the princess over. Some people might not have realized it, but at least a few of these sly nobles had to notice if someone like me did. Even so, they were all praising him. It was probably because he was the one who emerged victorious.

“His Highness sounds so kind,” Rose noted.

Veronica shook her head. “I don’t know about that. I think he’s more on the cunning side,” she commented.

In my opinion, I thought he was messing with something he shouldn’t have. After all, the reason Beatrice, the heroine of the novel, decided to awaken as a wizard was because she had felt threatened after the crown prince gave her an assassin’s severed head as a coming-of-age gift.

“He’s so attractive!”

“I agree. Although he’s wearing a mask, he’s probably as handsome as we thought, given his impressive height and his good figure.”

It might have been okay if it was anyone else, but I started to become lightheaded as I listened to my acquaintances praising the crown prince. Should I feign going for a walk and look for a lounge? An overwhelming impulse to do so came over me.

Just then, a man approached Rose.

“Hello, Lady Rose,” he greeted. “I’m Justin, one of the imperial palace knights.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Sir Justin.” Rose didn’t look displeased about this encounter. The two engaged in polite conversation for a bit before leaving for

the stage to dance.

“That’s nice to see,” Veronica commented as she watched them.

“Yes, it is,” I answered.

At that moment, Mary Ann and Catherine started making a commotion. “Oh, that’s Lord Elios over there, isn’t it?”

I took a glimpse and saw a man with an intellectual aura surrounded by a multitude of women. Although he didn’t appear in the novel, he was considered the most eligible bachelor in the empire at the moment. He was definitely handsome.

I was about to say something in response, but the two of them were far too motivated to wait. “Let’s go!” they said.

Before I knew it, the motivated pair were already fast approaching him. I giggled softly at the sight.

“I guess it’s just the two of us now,” Veronica noted quietly.

“It is.”

She gave a faint smile and mumbled, “I heard... Sir Mikhail didn’t attend the banquet today.” I wasn’t aware of this as he was no longer any concern of mine. Nonetheless, Veronica continued, her expression darkening slightly. “I heard that he wasn’t feeling well... I hope he’s not down with an illness.”

Perhaps it was because of her broken heart, but from time to time, ever since the incident that had occurred between her and Mikhail, she wore a gloomy look on her face.

Should I ask her to go for a walk with me? I knew I had to pass through the garden to get to the lounge. Furthermore, I figured claiming the walk had tired me out would be a good excuse to use to take a break afterwards and search for a lounge. “Um, Veronica,” I began, but then a young man suddenly approached us.

“Hello, how are you ladies?” he asked. “I’m Dylan, one of the imperial palace knights.”

“Ah, yes. Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Nice to meet you,” Veronica answered as well.

The man glanced at me with a reddened face. “Lady Floyen, if you don’t mind...”

Was he going to ask me for a dance? The thought made me nervous since it had been a while since someone had asked me to be their dance partner.

“I’d like to talk to your friend Lady Veronica for a moment. Will that be okay?” he asked instead. He sounded rather determined.

I was a bit surprised. Then why did he address me first? He made me misunderstand his intentions. I resented what he did for a moment, then nodded my assent. There was no reason for me to be offended by a minor thing.

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

Veronica interrupted with a frown. “Wait a minute, Sir Dylan. Shouldn’t you have asked me first if I’m the one you want to talk to?”

She had mentioned exactly what had been on my mind.

“Ah, I saw the two of you ladies alone... so I asked Lady Floyen first because I figured it might put her in an awkward situation if she were to be left alone,” he said, contrite.

“I don’t feel like having a chat with you. Sorry,” Veronica refused. Be that as it may, I could see a hint of regret in her eyes.

I could tell what she was truly feeling. She probably refused because she was afraid I would end up all alone. I was thankful that she was thinking about me, but on the other hand, I felt sorry because it seemed like I had become a burden for her. It would be more comfortable for me to escape the banquet hall on my own, anyway... so I should consider this an opportunity.

“I think I’m going to have to take a break... if you don’t mind, why don’t you go talk with him, after all?” I offered.

Veronica looked surprised. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, I’m just tired, so I’ll go find someplace to rest.”

She looked relieved at my lighthearted excuse. Then, she glanced Dylan, a blush rising to color her cheeks. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll see you soon.”

I grinned at her and left to escape the banquet hall.

I should take a walk around the garden.



Max, who had been watching Jubelian all this time, smirked. That was truly amazing. There were quite a few young men who tried to approach Jubelian, but all of them had been dissuaded by Duke Floyen’s vicious gaze. Was this why she didn’t have anyone to ask her to dance back then? It was pitiful to think about how Jubelian might’ve been upset at not having the chance to dance even once, but on the other hand, Max felt relieved that his master decided to step up and get rid of those pesky insects.

At this rate, he would be able to relax...

At that moment, Max spotted a pest that had escaped his master’s siege. “Dylan, how dare you!” he hissed to himself. He had no idea that one of his immediate subordinates out of all people would try to make a move on Jubelian. Dylan was bowing his head, which made it seem like he was about to ask her for a dance. Max got up from his seat, unable to hold back the tumultuous anger boiling in his stomach.

“What’s wrong?” the emperor asked. “Are you going to ask someone for a dance?”

However, Max couldn’t even hear him, for there was only one person who he was pouring all his attention to.

You think I’ll just sit here and watch you dance with someone other than me? Max thought to Jubelian, losing all his sense of reason. He decided to approach Jubelian.

At that moment, he saw Dylan take the hand of the noblewoman beside Jubelian rather than Jubelian herself, and he paused.

What? He wasn't after her? He was taken aback for a moment, then he instinctively turned toward his master. *What?*

He scrunched his nose. When he looked closely, he could tell his master was laughing at him, wearing a smirk on his face. Good God! His master set this up to make fun of him! Max silently cursed the older man.

Then, he noticed Jubelian turn around and leave the banquet hall. His opportunity had risen, he realized, and his eyes sharpened.

Max, having regained his composure, spoke to the emperor in a relaxed voice. "I'm tired, so I'm going to take a break," he said. Even if the emperor would try to stop him, Max was adamant about going, but he didn't. The emperor simply nodded without opposition, perhaps because Max had spoken to him politely.

"Sure. The banquet will last for a long time. Just don't stay away for too long."

"Okay."

It was finally time to play hide-and-seek with Jubelian, but there was no hurry as he already knew where she was going to hide. *Wait there and be patient*, he thought, his mouth curling into a hidden smile behind his mask.

He walked with a deliberately slow and languid pace to give her time to hide.



The sun had just set and the sky had darkened. I could see the stars settling in one by one. I leisurely strolled through the garden, heading for the lounge. The garden was quiet and I could barely sense the presence of others.

Suddenly, I heard whimpers.

As if I had been possessed, I walked in the direction of the sound. There, I heard someone mutter, "I did my best, but no one knew..."

I stared at the person in question, trying to parse through the feeling of familiarity she brought with her. I had heard this voice somewhere before. She had reddish blonde hair I had definitely seen before. Where?

It was then that the woman realized I was here, making eye contact with me. Her red eyes widened immediately.

“Y-You are...!”

When I saw her point at me, I remembered who she was. She was the woman I had met back at the temple. Judging from how wet her sleeves were, it seemed that she lacked a handkerchief once again. “Here,” I said as I handed over mine.

Her expression twisted and she raised her voice. “Go away!” she spat. “I don’t need this...”

At that moment, I sensed someone’s presence nearby.

“Who’s fighting?”

“Is the sound coming from over there?”

I sighed when I heard those voices. I didn’t want to stand out, and so I decided to hurry into the lounge. “Hey, I’m going to—”

I attempted to leave after making a quick goodbye, but she grabbed me by the wrist. “Follow me,” she said.

The thought of shaking her hand off crossed my mind, but I couldn’t bring myself to treat someone who had just been crying so callously. I decided that spending just a moment with her should be fine since we were in a palace surrounded by security guards anyway. The only thing I had to worry about was avoiding the crown prince.

Coming to that conclusion, I followed after a woman whose name I didn’t even know.



Even though Max had decided to saunter toward Jubelian’s location, he ended up hurriedly leaving the banquet hall instead. Worried, he quickly searched the garden for her, but she was nowhere to be found. He couldn’t feel

her presence anywhere.

Did she already make it to the lounge? Max quickened his pace. He passed by one, two, three... and countless more lounges until he finally reached the one he told her about. He opened the door and his expression, covered by the mask, distorted violently. *She wasn't here?*

Max opened the door to all the other lounges, but he couldn't find Jubelian anywhere. He gradually became more and more anxious, his insides catching fire.

"Y-Your Highness? What's the matter?" a knight taking a break in the lounge asked, startled.

Max observed his surroundings and asked, "By any chance, did a woman come by around here?"

"Not that I know of, Your Highness."

As soon as the knight finished speaking, Max left the annex.

Where was she? Even though the imperial palace made sure to strengthen its security during a banquet, Max couldn't help but feel uneasy now that Jubelian was no longer within reach. *Where did she go?*

He activated the mana inside his body and quickly searched his surroundings. Nevertheless, he couldn't see her glittering silver hair nor feel her unique, feather-like footsteps anywhere near him.

Jubelian! he thought desperately.

Thinking this was a waste of his time, Max hastily climbed to the top of a building to get a bird's-eye view of the palace. From the very height of a tall building, he gazed down at the people below. There were crowds of them looking as small as ants. Regardless, Jubelian was nowhere to be seen. Max reflexively clenched his fists.

The vast palace and all the pathetic people within it peacefully enjoying the festivities even though she was gone bothered him. He started getting irritated, the urge to rid the premises of all of these people rising within him. Little by little, Max began to flood with violent impulses. Should he head back to the

banquet hall, kill the emperor, and have the knights search for her?

At that moment, an icy voice spoke from behind him. "You despicable louse."

Max jolted and he spun around, his chaotic, bloodthirsty eyes narrowing. "You!"

His master, Duke Floyen, stood before him. His frigid tone echoed in his ears. "It's ridiculous for you to claim that you'll protect my daughter with that head of yours."



The place the unknown woman had led me to was a dark room located at an annex in an odd corner of the imperial palace. The dismal atmosphere of the place made it seem as if a ghost was going to appear at any moment. Although the palace allowed entrance to most places when a banquet was held, there were still some prohibited areas, such as the royal family's bedrooms or the trove where treasures were kept. Places like that were usually heavily guarded, but since there were no guards around this area, I wondered if it was okay to enter this place. The atmosphere was so spooky that I didn't dare step in.

"Hey, is it okay to go in here?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied with a frown.

I sighed at her confident answer. I didn't feel very good about this idea, and I was tempted to leave, but the woman casually sat down on the long, shabby bed in the room. Then, she faced me, raising a brow.

"What are you doing? Sit down," she subtly demanded.

Unable to leave her, I walked into the room and took a seat next to her. Her red lips parted and a cold voice left from her mouth as she glared at me. "If you tell anyone that I cried, I'll kill you," she threatened. "Got it?"

"Who exactly are you?" I asked in return, startled.

She stared at me imposingly. "That's none of your business," she huffed.

I wondered if she was still talking down to me like this despite knowing who I was. I sighed at her harsh confidence. She looked my age, which meant that there was no way she could've been unaware of how to behave properly. Then, a thought crossed my mind.

Even in a fantasy world like this, no one was perfect since they were still human. Not only were there bad eggs like me, but there were also people who suffered from mental or physical illnesses, and those who were in troubled positions due to their broken families. These people were treated as a disgrace in the community and were not allowed to show their faces amongst high society.

However, today's banquet was mandatory and required all immediate family members of aristocrats aged 15 or older to attend. The consequences of not attending were getting on the crown prince's bad side in addition to having to pay a huge fine. This prompted every noble who could make the trip to attend the banquet.

Given that she was crying so much earlier, I determined that this woman must've been suffering from familial issues. After finally coming to a conclusion, I smiled gently and replied, "Okay, I won't tell anyone."

She scowled. "You. What's your name?"

I could've simply told her, but if I did, then she could've been made guilty of committing insubordination against the daughter of a duke. For this reason, I decided to keep quiet about it. "I'll tell you my name if you tell me yours," I offered.

She shut her mouth for a moment. When she opened it back up, she glowered at me. "Whatever," she scoffed. "I'll just remember your face."

I silently lamented her reaction before realizing that she might cause trouble if we ended up bumping into each other again back at the banquet hall. Contemplating that, I got lost in my thoughts for a second.

Then I noticed I was beginning to feel strangely cold. Unwilling to stay in this room any longer, I said, "If you have nothing more to say, I'll be on my way. I'll never tell anyone about you, so don't worry."

As I was about to stand up, however, she hurriedly grabbed my hand. “Who said I was done talking?”

For some reason, I found the way she spoke and looked at me adorable. Without realizing it, I started to laugh.



“So, what is it that you want to tell me?”

Beatrice stared at the silver-haired girl. Looking into her beautiful blue eyes—reminiscent of a lake sprinkled with periwinkle flowers—seemed to gradually calm her down for some reason.

Okay, she had warned her, and this girl didn’t seem to have a big mouth... maybe it wouldn’t be too bad of an idea to tell her.

Her mind now filled with complacent thoughts she would normally never have, Beatrice parted her lips. “Today... I did my best to get on Father’s good side, but it didn’t work out as planned. Everyone laughed at me, and my mother scolded me.” When she recalled what had happened, something inside her broke and she felt a fresh new wave of tears welling up. Her vision began to blur and soften like a watercolor painting.

She had a cold father and a mother who only pressured her to work harder. Beatrice tried her best not to make any mistakes because she wanted to be loved by them, but...

“I don’t even know how I can improve from here,” she confessed. “No matter how hard I try, I’ll never be accepted.”

The emotions she had been tentatively suppressing until now began to mount. Although she vowed never to show anyone her weak side, Beatrice became so overwhelmed by her sentiments that she couldn’t stop the tears dripping from her eyes.

She was probably going to laugh at her for being pathetic now, wasn’t she? Beatrice was about to glare at the silver-haired girl to dissuade her from doing

so, but to her surprise, the girl had leaned closer, throwing an arm over her shoulders and enveloping them in comforting warmth.

“You’ve had a hard time, haven’t you?” the girl said. Her gentle voice was so kind that it pierced Beatrice’s aching heart. They were the very words that she had needed to hear the most, exhausted as she was by every fruitless ordeal she was made to endure.

“But you don’t have to try so hard to earn someone’s approval,” the girl continued.

“Are you really unaware of the fact that you’ll fall behind if you don’t earn others’ recognition in this society?” Beatrice shot back, disgruntled.

A bitter smile adorned the silver-haired girl’s delicate face. “I’m saying this because I’ve been through the same thing. I made great efforts in the past, desperate to determine my worth by how others evaluated me.” Beatrice stared at the silver-haired girl with shaky eyes. She could sense a hint of weariness in her gaze. “But then I realized that I was the only one who could decide my own worth.”

Beatrice pressed her lips together tightly. Then, she asked, “How are you living now, then?”

“I’ve let go of everything that hurt me. I’m trying to live for my own happiness,” the girl replied, her voice carefree in a way that Beatrice could only envy.

“Happiness...” Beatrice echoed unconsciously. It was something that she never had the luxury to think about before since she had lived under the impression that happiness was only possible after attaining her mother’s acceptance. However, her resolve had shaken when she had listened to the girl’s words.

Could... Could she really let go?

She fought to answer this vexing question, but then her eyes collided with the girl’s warm blue ones. As if possessed, she drowned in them.

Then, she clenched her fists. She had made up her mind.



Had she calmed down now? I think we could start heading back to the banquet hall...

I thought about it for a moment. Then, I noticed her condition. People would definitely start talking if she entered the hall with her face all tear-streaked. Although I had encouraged her not to feel suffocated by others, I wasn't an advocate of abandoning common sense. I offered her my handkerchief once again. "Here, wipe your tears."

I was going to let her handle it herself if she shook me off, but she ended up accepting my favor. Somehow, her actions reminded me of Max.

Without realizing it, a chuckle had almost slipped from my mouth at the realization, but I kept it at bay. Then, she looked at me and said, "You can call me Bea."

Bea. I had heard that name somewhere before, hadn't I?

Suddenly, she grabbed my wrist. "Let's go," she said, ushering me out of the room first. Then, she closed the door behind us. Glancing at me, she gave me a warning. "Don't tell anyone that you've been here."

"Why?" I asked.

"It's not a very pleasant place."

As I thought, she must have chosen the spookiest place in the palace to threaten me. I pondered about the identity of the room for a moment, then decided it simply must've been haunted. We had exited the cell-like space and were walking in the hallway, when a dreary voice came from behind us.

"It was you."

I reflexively turned my head. Then, I recoiled in fright. I took an instinctive step back, the sight before me terrifying me even more than any ghost ever could.

The crown prince, covered in black, stood before me with his mask still on. The bleak aura surrounding him made him look like the grim reaper.



At first, Max lost all sense of reason, becoming furious enough that he was ready to pull out his sword and attack his master. However, his violent and destructive thoughts gradually subsided when he recalled Jubelian's words from before.

"Thank you for getting angry on my behalf, but what you said to Father back there was too much."

Max felt his head clear up and his reason return to him as her words worked to suppress his ferocious impulses. There was no way a man who cared so much about his daughter would just sit by and watch her fall into danger.

Still... Max wanted to see her.

In his head, he understood that he needed to stay calm, but he couldn't stay still due to his anxiety. The only way he could banish these awful feelings was to confirm that she was okay with his own eyes.

As if he had been stranded in a desert wishing for a drop of water, a sense of desperation overcame Max. It was this desperation that had made an arrogant man like him kneel before his master. "Tell me where she is, Master. Please," he pleaded, barely managing to get the words out with all his pride laid down. Still, kneeling and bowing was nothing to him if it meant that he could see her all the sooner.

Regis, quietly observing Max, opened his mouth to speak. "Go to the annex where the Room of Shadows is."

Max's eyes widened and he raised his voice at the mention of the Room of Shadows. "Why are you only telling me that now? What if she enters and ends up getting trapped?!"

Regis stayed silent, merely studying Max after he had returned to his

previously impudent self.

Max gritted his teeth. “I’ll bring her back first, then we’ll talk,” he spat.

Only after his disciple had disappeared from sight did Regis finally answer the young man’s question. “I needed to make sure that you would protect her even if... I happened to be gone,” Regis murmured solemnly.

Meanwhile, Max rushed to the annex, ignorant of his master’s thoughts. Why did she go there, anyway? *That idiot.* The Room of Shadows was the most perfect prison cell in the world; it was so perfect that it didn’t even require guards. Although the cell had a key, it was only used to seal the door. The only people who could open and close the cell freely without artifacts were descendants of the royal family.

Max knew everything had to be fine since the door normally remained closed, but he was still driven by frenetic impulsivity. He frantically ran to his destination. Once he neared it, he noticed something odd.

He could definitely feel—wait, what is that aura? Every descendent of the royal family had a distinctly different aura from normal people, which was said to be due to the special lineage of the first emperor, the archmage.

“I carry the blood of the great race of Dragons. For this reason, my descendants, you will be able to wield wizardry like me.”

The authenticity of this statement, which was claimed to be spoken by the first emperor, was unknown, but it was certainly true that the descendants of the royal family had a special aura about them. That energy was the reason why they could open and close the doors to the Room of Shadows.

Who was with Jubelian? Two suspects popped into Max’s head. He didn’t know whether it was his sister or father, but he was confident that one of them was with her. If whoever it was dared to even touch a fingertip of hers, he was going to kill them.

Max, leaving behind a trail of murderous intent, quickly approached the location where he felt Jubelian’s presence coming from.

“It was you,” he growled.

Max was aware of the fact that all the attacks attempted on him were done so by both the empress and his stepsister. Nevertheless, he had left his sister alone since she was weak and unworthy of his hostility. However, his carelessness had caught him off guard. He was furious at himself for remaining complacent until now.

Was that why his master came to see him? His sister must've undergone a crisis after what had happened today. She must've been looking for a way to flip the situation in her favor. The solution she must've come up with was to take Jubelian hostage and summon Duke Floyen.

Max smirked. "Beatrice, it was none of my business whether you thought up a stupid plan or not," he thought viciously. "But..."

His eyes shifted over to Jubelian, who appeared quite different from usual. He felt his blood boil when he saw her frightened expression.

"I'll never forgive you for messing with Jubelian."

Max, gripped by anger, glared at his stepsister with ferocity. There was no way Beatrice would be able to withstand his violent aura. It wasn't something even the strongest of knights could endure. It would be good to warn her not to do anything stupid ever again. Max took a step forward, carefully watching as his sister trembled like a leaf.

At that moment, Jubelian stepped in front of his sister and curtsied. "I greet the Crown Prince, soon to become the Great Sun of our empire."

The terrible thoughts that had flooded Max's mind swiftly disappeared as soon as he heard her voice.



At first, I was relieved that he wasn't looking at me. However, when I noticed where his eyes were focused, I was startled. He was looking at Bea. I hastily rummaged through my thoughts for a solution. Unfortunately, I couldn't willingly step up to the man who I had been trying so hard to avoid. What

should I do? I needed to see what he was planning on doing, first...

Surprisingly, however, my body ended up moving reflexively when I noticed Bea trembling in fear. It was like I had thrown all caution to the wind.

"I greet the Crown Prince, soon to become the Great Sun of our empire," I said. "I'm Jubelian Eloy Floyen from the Floyen household."

I had no idea why I did such a thing. And to a man who tried to torture me in the original novel, no less. Strangely enough, stopping him was the first thing that came to my mind when I looked at him.

"My friend and I got lost and ended up coming all the way here. Is this a restricted area by any chance?" I asked. It was said that humans adapted in dangerous situations and that saying seemed to be true. My brain began to do wonders once I threw myself into the thick of it. The crown prince had tortured me in the original novel because I was considered a criminal, but it was true that he couldn't do anything to me at this point in time yet.

Now that I had gathered some more confidence, I looked straight into his eyes and apologized. "Please be generous with your forgiveness as we had ended up here without knowing better since there were no guards out front."

My courage could only last for so long. I was creeped out. The crown prince was wearing an eerie mask, which made it hard to tell how he felt about my words. I waited for his response with this in mind, but then he started reaching for me.

I was taken aback and frightened at the same time, but I stifled how I felt and continued watching to see what he would do. His hand, which alarmed me at first, was stretched out in front of me. There was still some distance between us.

"Let's get out of here first," he said.

I hesitated at his unexpected offer to escort us, but then I realized it would be impossible to refuse the crown prince's offer in a situation like this. I grabbed a hold of his hand. His hand was big and covered with a glove, but it held me softly.

I was beginning to wonder why it felt a bit familiar when I suddenly

remembered that I had forgotten about someone: Bea! When I turned around, I discovered that she was staring at us with astonishment.

I wondered why she had frozen in place, but then I realized that she was looking at me rather sullenly. She must've been surprised to find out that I was the daughter of a duke. It was true that I had a high social status, but I didn't want to intimidate a person I had a nice conversation with just a moment ago because of it.

Assuming that she was a lonely child who didn't have anyone else to open up to, I decided to remain friendly to her. I held my free hand out to her. "Let's go, Bea," I said.

She looked surprised for a moment, but she recovered quickly, sidling up to me and taking my hand. Perhaps it was because she was afraid she'd be left alone in this dark place, but her grip on my hand was so strong that it hurt. "It hurts," I told her, voicing how I felt.

Although I had been talking to Bea, the crown prince flinched and loosened his already weak grip on my hand. "Did it hurt?" he asked.

I shook my head at his unexpected courtesy. "Oh, no, Your Highness. I was just saying that because my friend was holding my hand rather tightly." I spoke in a roundabout way, but I glanced toward Bea. She realized what I was talking about and relaxed her grip a little.

The way she interlaced her fingers with mine was unusual, however. Having lost the ability to control both of my hands, I sighed.

The three of us continued walking in that strange formation for a while. At some point, I realized that the nervousness I had once possessed had eased up a little.

I ran into the crown prince in the end, but nothing major had occurred. I was glad for it.



What had gotten into that thing's head? Beatrice puzzled over her brother's peculiar behavior. It was weird, no matter how hard she thought about it. He hadn't threatened her, and now he was pretending to be innocent and escorting Jubelian. Was he just being cautious because he was afraid more rumors would circulate?

At that moment, Jubelian turned to Beatrice and gave her a refreshing smile. For some reason, when she recalled how Jubelian had called her a friend earlier, Beatrice felt moved. Was she really the same good-for-nothing lady the rumors claimed? She was so nice.

"Bea, you'll accompany me back to the banquet hall, right?" Jubelian asked.

She came back to her senses at the mention of the banquet. "Ah, no. My family is waiting in a lounge, so I think I should head back there later." She glared at her brother as she lied, afraid that he would meddle in her business.

What was he staring so hard at, though? Oh...

Beatrice's expression contorted when she realized where her brother's attention was diverted. A man who had never shown any interest in the beautiful, clever women the empress had sent to assassinate him or gather intel was now staring raptly Jubelian.

How dare he make eyes at her! He should know his place! Jubelian was the first person to listen to her worries and show her warmth. To realize that her devilish brother held such an impious heart toward the angelic Jubelian made Beatrice feel sick. She was gritting her teeth in anger, but then she heard a gentle voice address her.

"You can come over whenever you want to have tea and chat."

Listening to Jubelian's indescribably sweet tone, Beatrice felt tears well up in her eyes again. Despite being unaware of her identity, Jubelian had reached out to her and comforted her.

Alright. She couldn't just sit by and watch that madman approach her friend. After making up her mind, Beatrice opened her mouth to speak. "There will be another banquet in two weeks anyway. We can see each other again then," she suggested. She could feel her brother glaring holes into her the moment she

said those words. However, Beatrice looked straight into his eyes instead of cowering in fear and added, “I’ll invite you over for some tea after that.”

“Okay,” Jubelian responded with a nod.

Beatrice was worried about what she would do if she was rejected, but her mood improved vastly when her offer had been accepted so willingly.

Okay. She was going to tell Jubelian who she was at the coming-of-age ceremony, then she would warn her about that demon brother of hers. Beatrice’s eyes shone with determination.

Max, watching his stepsister’s expressions, sneered in disdain. Since she was trying to set up more meetings with Jubelian... Beatrice was probably planning on blatantly taking advantage of her. He refused to give his wicked sister the chance.

Vicious sparks flashed violently between the siblings’ eyes when their gazes met. Jubelian, unaware of the psychological warfare taking place between them, peacefully held back a yawn.

She was tired. She couldn’t wait to go back home and sleep.



When the banquet hall could finally be seen from a good distance, Bea stopped walking. “I think I should get going,” she said.

Her bitter expression caught my eye. I could roughly guess why she had such a look on her face; it was probably because she didn’t want to go back to her family. She had a bad relationship with them, after all. Perhaps it was because we were in the same boat, but I wanted to cheer her up by mentioning something positive. “Okay, take care of yourself. I’ll see you in two weeks,” I said brightly.

She nodded, blushing slightly. “I’ll see you, then,” she breathed. She slowly unlaced her fingers from mine and slipped away.

“Goodbye, Bea.”

For a moment, I watched her leave. Then, I turned back to the crown prince. He was still holding my hand, staring straight ahead in the silence. “We were in a pinch because we had gotten lost,” I explained. “Thank you so much for escorting us to the banquet hall like this.”

Instead of answering, he simply nodded in return. It seemed like the crown prince was a better person than I thought, but I decided to remain vigilant anyway. There was a chance that he was trying to trick me by showing me his good side. It made sense, since even the royal princess considered him as a psychopath.

Resolving to remain careful around him so he couldn’t find any fault with me, I looked straight ahead and started walking. It was then I felt the front of my shoe collide with something.

“Ahhh!” I shouted. I had almost fallen, but I was lucky enough to be caught by the crown prince. The only problem was that his arms were now around my waist, supporting me.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

The same thing had happened with Father and Max as well. Why did I fall so often? I started to berate myself, but then I quickly realized that showing how embarrassed I was would only serve to make the situation even more awkward.

Pretending to be calm, I glanced at the crown prince. I had no idea what was going through his head because his face was covered with a mask. “Thanks to your help, I’m fine, Your Highness,” I replied.

I was worried that he was going to say something else, but what he said as he carefully took his hands from my waist was unexpected. “I’ll be going.”

I didn’t think he was going to end our encounter so cleanly like that. I had even thought about returning to the banquet hall together with him, ready to endure what people might say about us including any mentions of a scandal. It felt weird to think that he was being considerate toward me, but I pushed down how I felt, keeping calm.

“Thank you again, Your Highness.”

I had only lowered my head slightly before looking back up, but he had

already disappeared from my sight. It felt as if I had become bewitched, having witnessed the crown prince's ghost or something. I let out a hollow laugh when I realized that reading too many novels was beginning to affect my thought process. Shaking away useless thoughts, I made my way back to the banquet hall.



Max watched Jubelian. She was now far away from him. He held his arm aloft, pretending to hold her. Like the stories of dragons kidnapping princesses, he wanted to whisk her away and put her somewhere safe where he could see her every day.

If he did that, though, she would be scared of him.

As he held Jubelian in his arms after catching her fall, Max felt like he could lose all sense of reason. He wanted to pull her to him, dragging her in by the waist and wrapping her up in his embrace before pressing his body closer to hers and mercilessly devouring her soft pink lips. Meeting her uncomfortable gaze, however, felt like a bucket of ice water washing over his desires.

"Thanks to your help, I'm fine. Thank you, Your Highness," she had said.

He was nothing but the scary crown prince to her. He knew that he would only mentally scar her if he recklessly followed his instincts.

He recalled how Jubelian had told him that she would run away if she were made to marry him.

If he were to do as he wished, there was also the chance that this would all end with her being more than just frightened of the crown prince. For this reason, Max had held onto what little patience he had left, mustering the strength to take his hands off her.

Removing his hands didn't mean that the heat that had flooded through his body would subside, however. That was why he hurriedly left and hid from her. He ended up quietly following her as he worked to suppress his mounting

urges.

When Jubelian disappeared from his sight, his urges finally dissipated. She finally went back in. Reason seemed to return to him at last now that he was able to confirm that she had safely made it back to the banquet hall.

Max recalled what had happened earlier. In the end, she didn't get to clear up any misunderstandings with Beatrice. Other things might've been acceptable, but Max couldn't stand the fact that she had taken Jubelian to such a dangerous place like the Room of Shadows. He pondered over how to get his revenge for a moment, but he didn't get very far until his anger toward his sister calmed.

If he did something spiteful like that, she would probably say something unnecessary to Jubelian, who seemed to be unaware of Beatrice's true identity. Either way, Jubelian had definitely said she was her friend.

"Please be generous with your forgiveness as we had ended up here without knowing better since there were no guards out front," she had said.

Her expression back then was definitely the same expression she had when she stepped forward and said that she was going to protect him. He needed to distance those two from each other somehow, but the main problem was...

Aside from what Beatrice was up to, the two had promised to meet in two weeks before saying goodbye. What if his sister were to reveal her identity at the banquet in two weeks and tell Jubelian things that would ruin his image as the crown prince? In the worst-case scenario, the trust he had accumulated with her up until now could crumble.

Feeling anxious, Max unconsciously slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket. He needed to let her know that he was harmless before that. How could he...

At that moment, he felt a thin slip of something inside his pocket. Without much thought, he took the mysterious object out and immediately realized what it was. It was the letter that he had failed to send to Jubelian a few months ago.

A satisfied smile soon appeared on Max's face. At least he had a clear excuse to write to her now.

It didn't matter if it was a letter sent by a carrier pigeon or an official letter. Still, Max thought it would be better to send one without alerting the emperor or empress.

Beatrice... he didn't know what that woman was going to do, so it would be best to use a carrier pigeon for covert messages. For a moment, Max considered using a smarter pigeon this time. Then, he smiled. After she reads the letter, she would know for sure that he wasn't a scary person, right?



"See you in two weeks, Lady Jubelian!"

Although I hadn't danced even once throughout the night, the banquet I had worried so much about had ended without much trouble. I recalled back to how I used to receive a lot of requests for a dance, then wondered if it was my bland dress that was at fault this time. Then, I noticed Father reaching for me.

"Let's go," he said.

I felt strange when I realized that Father had gone back to his original self. Today, Father was acting differently from usual. Or, knowing our past, should I be calling this his usual self instead? The sight of Father surrounded by others wasn't what was unfamiliar. It was the fact that he had suddenly started treating me well the past few days and that I had gotten used to it, which made me feel like he was not being himself anymore now. It was confusing.

He always used to be like this before... it was weird, no matter how much I thought about it. Suddenly, I had an uncanny thought that maybe he was normally nice to me and that there might've been a reason why he avoided me otherwise.

"Jubelian?" he called.

My thoughts scattered when I heard him address me. I shifted my gaze over to him, the very person I had just been thinking about. I noted how he looked at me. Thinking over it once more, Father's gaze had always been the same when

it came to me. My ridiculous new suppositions were concrete proof that my heart had become weak.

I swore to remain indifferent toward Father from now on, but I could still feel the change in my heart. The ripples had already begun to spread.



The emperor watched the guests gradually leave the banquet hall. He frowned slightly.

No matter how much he thought about it, Regis seemed different than usual today. The duke had pretended to be calm as he greeted him, but the emperor could tell that he was definitely deviating from his normal self.

It wasn't just because that apathetic guy was responding to the emperor without hesitation, but because he also seemed to be showing a lot of concern for that wench, his daughter. Although the emperor had no exceptional abilities, he made-up for that flaw by being considerably quick-witted. That was why he had been able to infer a lot from the things that had occurred at today's banquet.

He had heard that the duke gave up on his one and only daughter because she was a crazy and deranged... but to call such a shameless little girl deranged? That was nonsense that even a dog could laugh at.

The emperor recalled how Jubelian had bowed to him and he smirked. Could it be that the duke had been trying to fool him? He knew that Jubelian was just an ordinary girl who hadn't been trained in swordsmanship and that she didn't have any of her father's talents. Up until now, the emperor had assumed she was worthless garbage, so he didn't pay any attention to her. However, starting today, the emperor decided to correct his judgement.

She was still a piece of garbage, but she was garbage that vermin were interested in.

He was worried that the duke's leash might've loosened, so that was good.

The Regis that the emperor knew was a monster. Although the Eye of Kirke controlled him, it was unclear when the duke would break free and charge at the throne.

Maximillian had also been more obedient than the emperor had expected him to be as of late, but he had to wait and see if this was a safe conclusion to make since his son was a dangerous person by nature...

The emperor gave a sinister smile.

He should keep a watchful eye on Jubelian first.

